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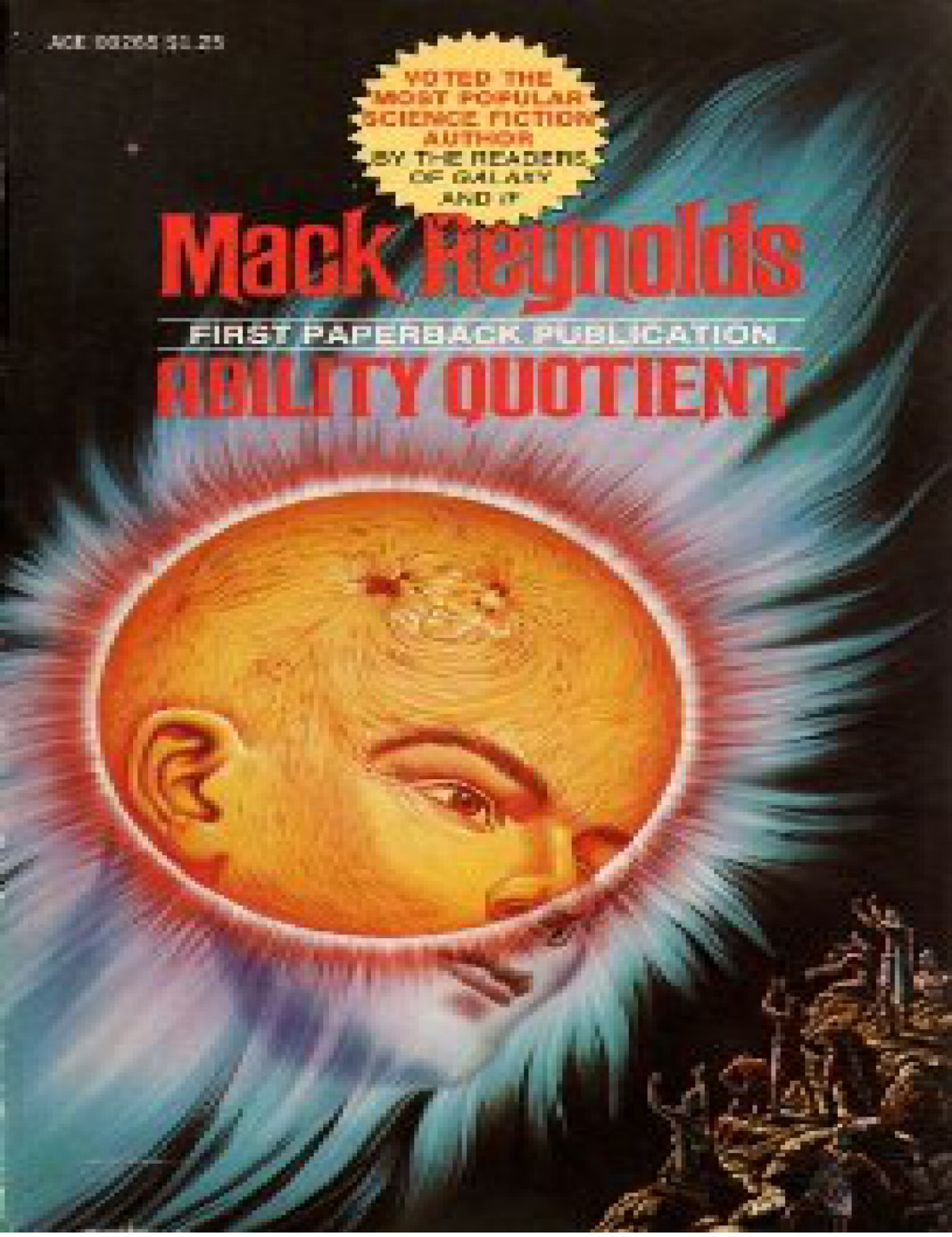
ABILITY QUOTIENT



SHOUT
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Annotation

An elite soldier is asked to take part in problem researching sophisticated physical and mental testing, and to take university coursework as their computers direct. He finds out that more is going on than this, the creation of a mental and physical elite, going way beyond supergenius IQ into physical abilities and even immortality.

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Ability Quotient
Mack Reynolds

PART ONE

Chapter One

Bert Alshuler said, “The one thing I learned in the army that was worth learning was never to volunteer.”

Professor Katz did his rueful smile. “I was in Korea,” he said. “It seems a long time ago, and, of course, it was.” It would have been difficult to put your finger on the professor’s age; he might have been in his early sixties, his late seventies. His hair was gray, rather than white, and he was vitally alert.

The younger man didn’t respond to the smile. “Then you should know.”

Leonard Katz shifted in his chair, leaned forward and touched the tips of his fingers together. He said, “It’s not exactly a matter of volunteering… ah… Alshuler. You were selected.”

“By whom?”

“By the computers of the National Data Banks.”

“Why me?”

“Remember the tests you took, immediately before release from the military?”

“How in the hell could I forget? They must have taken at least two weeks. Why, I couldn’t figure. We were getting out of the army, not in. It was just two more weeks of typical army snafu.”

“They were compiling your Ability Quotient,” the professor told him.

“Never heard of it.”

“Very few have. At this stage of the game, we who are on the project are keeping it minimized.”

Bert Alshuler recrossed his legs. He was beginning to become intrigued. “Kay,” he said. “Tell me about the Ability Quotient tests. Something like I.Q.?”

“It goes far beyond I.Q.” The professor made with his rueful smile again. “You see, the I.Q. tests were early in the game. They were the infancy of the tests of today. They didn’t and couldn’t measure all-round intelligence. There is no such thing. But they were a beginning. Today we still utilize an upgraded form of the I.Q. tests but we also test for verbal ability, verbal fluency, numerical ability, spatial ability, perceptual ability, memory, speed of reflexes, accident proneness, digital dexterity, analogizing power, mechanical aptitude, clerical aptitude, emotional maturity, veracity, tone discrimination, taste sensitivity, even natural charm, color blindness, accuracy, persistence, drive, neurosis, powers of observation, health and a few others.”

“Don’t I know it?” Alshuler remarked. “Like I said, it took two weeks to get through them all. Some were pretty silly. Anyway,

and…?"

"And you came out on top."

Alshuler scowled at him. "You mean of all the people in the country?"

Professor Katz shook his head. "No, of course not. All the people in the United States of the Americas have not been given the tests. However, most of those in your age group being released from the military and particularly those who were single and about to enter college have been. For one thing, we were in a position to give such persons our tests without arousing much interest in our project. The military is endlessly giving examinations and tests."

"And …?"

The professor leaned back in his chair again and looked at the younger man thoughtfully, as though wondering whether or not to go on. He obviously wasn't completely happy at the other's attitude.

He said finally, "We want you to enter into an experiment which will continue throughout the period you attend this university."

"I figured on working toward a doctorate, seven or eight years."

"It won't take you seven or eight years."

Bert Alshuler looked at him. "Why not?"

The professor said, "That's part of the experiment."

"Kay. We've finally got to the point. What experiment?"

Leonard Katz said, "My dear Alshuler, we want you to leave the selection of all your courses in the hands of the computers."

The younger man's face was blank. "How do you mean?"

"We want them to decide what you will study, at what pace you will go, whose lectures you assimilate, that sort of thing—for the whole period of your work here."

Bert Alshuler was dumbfounded. "You mean machines are going to decide if I become a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer, a—"

"Yes."

The student came to his feet. "No thanks. I may be silly but not that silly. I'm willing to allow my faculty adviser, or whatever you call him, to advise me on my courses but I'll be damned if I'm going to have a punch card machine breathing down my neck every time I decide something like whether I want pica or elite size type on my voco-typer."

The professor smiled. He said, "The tests indicated that you had a sense of humor, my dear Alshuler. Sit down. There's more to it than that, of course."

Bert Alshuler resumed his chair, but his expression was still hostile.

Katz put more urgency in his voice. "Have you ever considered how few persons really study what they should, or even what they

would like?"

"I don't think I follow that."

"In grammar school, the student is told what he shall learn. All are given the same courses, all at the same rate of progress, no matter the individual's abilities. Many youngsters hate history, or math, or whatever, but must study them. Some love these subjects but are not given the opportunity to delve into them to the extent they would like. Very well, when they achieve to high school they are given a bit of choice, but it is usually a decision made, by parents. If they do not have the wherewithal to see the child through college, or if they are anxious to have his services on the farm or in the family's small business, the child is enrolled in a commercial or mechanical course, and very often drops out before graduation, once again, no matter his abilities."

The professor paused for a moment. "On the other hand, you take the son of a well-to-do family who has a flair for mechanics, or possibly one of the arts or sciences. Unfortunately, his father is a businessman who attended an Ivy League college. He's going to see his son through the same school and eventually into the family business, if hades freezes over."

Bert Alshuler grunted understanding.

"Or," the professor pursued, "the student who does have freedom of choice but the inability to exercise it intelligently. Immediately before enrollment he sees a Tri-Di show involving a sympathetic doctor. Very well. Inspired, he signs up as a pre-med. A year later, bored, he meets an artist, or writer, or whatever, who sends him off on another tangent. Nothing will do but that he enter the arts. Which he does, possibly to his eventual sorrow. Next year…"

"Kay," Bert Alshuler said. "I get your point. And it sounds valid. But why in the hell should these punch card machines be in a better position to decide than I am?"

"They don't utilize punched cards any more, my dear Alshuler. But the reason is that they know more about you than you do."

"Oh, now… really."

The professor leaned forward again, put his fingertips together and looked very sincere. "But they do, you know. Since your birth, the National Data Banks have been filing away the information on Albert… ah… Alshuler. Not only data on you, but both of your parents. The doctor who presided at your birth recorded all pertinent information. So did every doctor who has treated you since. So have all your teachers. So have all the police with whom you have had dealings. All the information you ever supplied to census takers, to the Internal Revenue offices, to the military, is there, and the results of all the I.Q., Ability Quotient and other tests. You have no idea, my dear

Alshuler. The National Data Banks contain information that your own faulty memory has long since forgotten."

Bert Alshuler said abruptly, "What's in it for me if I… temporarily… accept this, uh, project?"

The professor nodded and flicked on a desk screen. He looked into it and made a rueful moue. "You are not in a very good bargaining position, I fear. Currently, your sole source of finances is your Guaranteed Annual Income. Of course, as a veteran, all your school expenses are paid."

Bert Alshuler held his peace.

The other said, "Your GAI will be doubled during the period you work with us. If you finish the whole project, that is, if you remain with us for as long as we wish, you will be awarded an additional five thousand pseudo-dollars." He twisted his mouth in amusement. "Which will undoubtedly be meaningless to you."

Alshuler scowled. "Why? Five thousand is no small sum to a student, and that's all I am now."

"Because, Mr. Alshuler, if the project is a success, by that time you will be wealthy beyond your dreams of avarice."

Chapter Two

Bert Alshuler looked at him sarcastically. “I have some pretty avaricious dreams,” he said. “Why will I be wealthy? Frankly, I’ve always been a little on the lazy side. I rather doubt that I’ve got the push to make myself very rich in the world as it is today.”

“I can’t tell you at this stage of the game,” the professor said.

The other grunted and thought about it He said finally, “How many other students are there in this deal?”

Katz hesitated before saying, “One other in the whole university. We would have liked to have more controls but the nature of the experiment is such that the fewer we have connected with it, the better.”

“Why does it have to be kept secret?”

“I can’t tell you at this stage,” the professor said again. “However, if you do decide to cooperate, then you must pledge not to discuss it with anyone whomsoever that is not connected with the project.”

Alshuler cocked his head slightly. “How do you know I’d keep the pledge?”

“Among the other tests you took was one for veracity. We must trust you to keep your word, and shall.”

“Make it three times the amount of my government Guaranteed Annual Income and I’ll accept for the first semester. From then on I’ll either renew or drop out, each semester that comes up.”

“Very well. However, you won’t be doing your studying by semesters.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t tell you at this stage, but you’ll probably find out on your own in very short order.” There was a tone in Leonard Katz’ voice that indicated that the interview was over.

Bert Alshuler stood. “Kay. When do I start? Where do I go to sign up, or whatever?”

The professor stood too and extended a hand to be shaken. “You just signed up,” he smiled. “You’ll be contacted.”

When Bert Alshuler had gone, another entered the office from an adjoining room. He was attired in the uniform of a lieutenant general of Security and was scowling.

Katz looked up at him, “What do you think, my dear General Paul?”

The other shook his head. “He doesn’t sound very cooperative.”

“We don’t want a wishy-washy. We want a man with push, his own ideas, with strength.”

“But we also need somebody we can control. I’d say take this

slowly, until we're sure about him."

"Very well. Possibly you are correct."

Bert Alshuler took an express elevator from the fiftieth floor of the high-rise building that housed the administration offices, including that of Professor Leonard Katz, to the ground floor and strode through the masses of milling students and instructors out onto the campus.

He muttered skeptically, "Beyond my dreams of avarice."

He would have taken on the offer at the original price, that is, double the Guaranteed Annual Income that was the right of every citizen of the United States of the Americas. He had asked for triple just to see what Katz reply would be and had expected to be refused. Surely, no matter how high his Ability Quotient, as the professor had called it, there must be scores of others who had placed approximately as high. But evidently they had wanted *him*, and fairly badly. The professor hadn't hesitated at all. He wondered now what the other's response would have been if he had demanded even more. He might keep it in mind, if he decided to remain on a second semester or more —but what had that been about his not being on a semester basis?

He lit out across the campus to one of the auto-cafes which he found almost deserted at this early time of the day. However, Jim Hawkins was seated at a corner table where they usually met.

When Bert came up, Jim said, "Scram. I'm waiting for a girl."

"So am I," Bert said, taking a chair across from the other. "So far, the right one hasn't come along, old buddy." He began fishing his Identity Card from his pocket.

Jim said, "This is the right one, but I saw her first. Scram."

"What's this scram thing?"

"Go away."

Bert put the card in the table slot and said, "How about a beer? I'm springing." He said into the screen, "Two large glasses of beer."

His old time army buddy said, "You've got a lot to learn, freshman. When you're living the student life on Guaranteed Annual Income, you can't go around buying beers for people this early in the day. By the end of the month you'll be starving."

The table top dipped and rose again with two chilled glasses of beer. They reached out for them.

"Mother's milk," Jim said appreciatively. "You all signed up?"

"I suppose so."

"What courses are you taking? Maybe I can give you some words of wisdom, old buddy."

"I'm not sure yet."

"I thought you said you were all signed up." Jim took a long draught, half emptying the glass. He was a tall, thin specimen, prone to sprawl his lanky body all over anything sprawlable upon, and his

face was as easy going as his form.

Bert Alshuler caught himself. Katz had emphasized that he was to discuss the mysterious project with absolutely no one.

He said, “Look. You were here last year. Who is Professor Leonard Katz?”

Jim Hawkins finished the rest of his beer and looked clown into the glass longingly. “Katz? You won’t be having anything to do with him. He’s a big mucky-muck. Always working on some government research program or other. He doesn’t teach.” He wiped the back of his right hand over his mouth to clean off the last of the beer head and added, “Katz doesn’t even know you exist.”

Bert said, “Another brew?”

Jim looked at him. “I keep warning you, old buddy. You can’t afford to waste your dough on booze.”

Bert ordered two more beers and said, “I just got a windfall, beyond my dreams of avarice.”

Jim grunted skepticism and said, “Then you’d better make it three beers. Here comes Jill.” He came to his feet, his expression subtly changed.

A pint-sized girl was approaching the table. Though quite petite, she had the graceful stride of an athlete or possibly a professional dancer. Her features, delicate save for a slightly wide mouth, bore no make-up whatsoever. A natural type, somewhat out of tune these days, Bert thought.

Even as he also stood, Bert wondered why it was that six and a half footers, such as Jim Hawkins, so often went for girls in the five foot category. Who was left for those poor girls who exceeded six feet in altitude?

She said, “Hi, Jim,” and looked at Bert.

Jim groaned and said, “All my instincts tell me not to introduce you, Killer, but I suppose I can’t get around it. Jill Masterson, Albert Alshuler. Jill, Bert. Watch out for him, Sweetie Pie, when it comes to women, he’s a fink.”

Jill held out a hand, man fashion. “Any enemy of Jim’s is a friend of mine,” she said. “He has the most fascinating enemies.”

Bert shook her hand and grinned. “Unfortunately, he happens to be my closest friend.” He held a chair for her. “Beer?”

“Fine.”

He pushed his glass of beer over to her and ordered another for himself.

The girl looked at Jim. “We’re not going to be seeing as much of each other as we thought. I’m going to have to change my schedule. I’m dropping both the Chaucer and the French.”

Jim said in protest, “Aw, the devil.”

Bert looked at him. “Chaucer? You?”

Jim was indignant. “What’s wrong with me and Chaucer? Maybe I love all those old Greeks, too.”

Jill looked at him suspiciously. “Jim Hawkins, did you sign up for that course because I was in the class?”

The lanky one cleared his throat and looked at his watch. He jerked his head in a gesture of resignation. “I’m going to have to go.” He looked at Bert suspiciously. “I don’t trust you with my girl, old buddy.”

Bert Alshuler put his hand over his heart. “You’re my own old buddy.”

Jim said, “Ha.” He came to his feet, and said, “Don’t you two do anything I would do.”

Jill said, “Ha.”

When Jim was gone, Jill looked after him reflectively. “He’s a nice guy,” she said, but there was friendly camaraderie in her voice, rather than an emotion indicating a relationship between man and woman.

He said, “Yeah. He saved my life eleven times.”

She looked at him, startled. “Eleven times? Where in the name of heavens were you?”

“Saving his life.”

She frowned, as though seeking the joke. “I mean where were the two of you?”

“Back to back in a machine gun nest. The gun was jammed and all we had were our automatics. Later on when the relief came, we counted them. There were ten on my side and eleven on his. If he hadn’t been there, those eleven gooks would have come up on my back. If I hadn’t been there, those ten would have come up on his. I figure I owe him one life.” He added softly, “And I hope some day to catch up with him. Jim’s the best.”

“Gooks?”

He looked at her. “Listen, when they’re trying to kill you, you don’t have polite names for them. They’re Gook’s, or Krauts, or Huns, or some such.”

She nodded. “I see.” She looked at her watch. “I’ll have to hustle along too.” She looked into his face frankly. “Rather short notice, but I think I like you, Bert Alshuler. What was that Killer bit when he introduced us? Are you mad for the ladies or something?”

He stood at the same time she did and walked along beside her to the door. “No,” he said wryly. “Kind of a old nickname back in the army. I’m not very smart with the ladies. I… I guess I got a late start. They hauled me into the military before I was out of short pants practically. At the door he said, I suppose I ought to go on back to my

mini-apartment and get around to unpacking. Things have been so hectic these past couple of days that I'm still living out of my suitcases."

"Which way are you going?"

"I'm over in the Parthenon Building."

"Well, so am I. I understand that the juniors and seniors call our quarters the dungeons. They're not as bad as all that, though."

"Sort of cramped. The new buildings have more room, now they've got the housing shortage licked. What's the population of this university city now?" He fell in step beside her, somewhat surprised that he didn't have to slow his pace to accommodate to her hers. She was a brisk little thing.

"Something like three hundred thousand," she said. "The use of TV and the computers came just in time. What in the name of heavens would they have done with this educational revolution if they had to teach in the old manner?"

"When the need for railroads came along, railroads were invented," he misquoted. He took her in from the side of his eyes. "Jim likes you pretty well. I know Jim."

She looked straight ahead. "I know," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Why? Jim's the best."

She sighed and said, "I have to look up twice to see the top of him."

He was unhappy, but there was nothing to say. Jim Hawkins had always had hard luck with his women— the women he was serious about. Practically all men liked him. Well, practically all women liked him too, but those who had really mattered to him didn't go further than that; they only *liked* him.

They were coming up to the high-rise building that contained their respective apartments. They were silent now. At the elevator banks, she turned to him and extended her hand again. "Nice to have met you, Bert, Jim has mentioned you, more than once."

He stared at the elevator door which closed behind her. In the past, when Jim Hawkins had come up with a new girl he was hot about, Bert Alshuler had steered clear. He didn't know if he was going to be able to do it this time, or not.

Chapter Three

He entered an empty elevator and said into the screen, “Sixty-third floor.”

He was still bemused, thinking of Jim and the girl, when he reached his floor and walked down the corridor to his door. The door screen picked him up upon approach and opened, and he was in the small living room-cum-bedroom-cum-kitchenette before the other had any indication of his approach.

Bert Alshuler stopped abruptly. “Looking for something?” he snapped.

The stranger had been bent over one of his suitcases, rummaging through it. He came erect and faced the apartment’s tenant, his face embarrassed.

He was a fraction smaller than Bert which made him about five-eight, about one-fifty and he looked to be in his middle thirties which gave him almost another ten years. He was dressed well but conservatively by present day standards, and was obviously no ordinary prowler.

Bert said, “How in the hell did you get in here?”

The stranger sat down on the couch which became a bed at night and looked defiant. He said, “What did you discuss with Professor Katz? I came to find what you discussed with Katz.”

“Did you expect to find it in my suitcase?”

“I thought I might find some indication. What did he want of you?”

Bert Alshuler was intrigued. He sat down on the mini-apartment’s sole comfort chair and eyed the newcomer. “Why don’t you ask him?”

Over the other’s face came a look of determination. He said, “I insist that you divulge to me the reason for your interview this morning with Leonard Katz.”

Bert said mildly, “Fine. Who are you?”

“That I am not ready to tell you.”

“Great. Then why don’t you get lost, in view of the fact that I’m about to hang one on your for breaking into my apartment and going through my private possessions?”

The stubborn determination intensified. The stranger put his hand inside his jacket and came forth with a pistol. He pointed it at Bert Alshuler. “Tell me immediately what it was that Professor Katz wanted with you this morning.”

Bert Alshuler looked at the other for a long considering moment. He ran the palm of his right hand over his mouth in a gesture of disgust and leaned forward slightly in the chair.

"You want to know something?" he said. "I'm an old combat man. I've been hit more times than I can offhand remember, but never with a gun of that small a caliber. It's a twenty-two with a two-inch barrel, a very inaccurate gun. You want to know something else? On top of everything else, I'll bet you're a lousy shot. And I'll bet that I can get out of this chair and rush you before you can finish me with that popgun." He waited another long moment before adding, "Want to try? If you do, start shooting, friend."

The other bug-eyed him.

Bert tensed up and repeated, "Start shooting, friend."

"Why… why…" The other darted a surprised look down at the gun, as though the small weapon had betrayed him.

Bert held his peace, only looking coldly at the other. There were butterflies in his stomach, a whole bevy of them, but his eyes were level and he knew that the interloper was more frightened than he was. He had been shot at before—all too, many a time—and he doubted that this one had ever heard the sound of a gun, outside a shooting gallery, or hunting rabbits, or whatever.

The stranger, his face working, came to his feet, the gun still at the ready. He began edging for the door. Bert Alshuler stayed where he was. There was no point in pushing his luck.

When the would-be gunman reached his avenue of escape he said, trying to keep his voice firm, "I warn you. For your own good, tell me what it was that Katz wanted with you."

"Go on, get out of here," Bert said in disgust. "Or maybe I'll change my mind and take that peashooter away from you and stick it where it won't do you much good at all."

The other was upset, but he had already lost the game and obviously knew it. He wasn't ready to shoot, and a gun is valueless in controversy if you aren't willing to use it.

He grabbed the door open, fled through it, banged it behind him.

Bert Alshuler continued to sit there in disgust. "Now what the hell was that all about?" he snarled.

On second reflection, now, he decided that he should have taken on the twitch, got in contact with Katz and delved into the thing. Kay, great. But suppose the other had had luck and managed to drill him between the eyes. That's all he needed. Two more holes in the head, one neatly centered between the eyes, the other taking out the back of the skull.

Well, he'd mention it to Katz the next time he came in contact with the professor. He began to come to his feet to get about unpacking. The identity screen on the door pinged, and he looked at it.

A stranger's face was there, but was staring as though down the

corridor, rather than looking directly ahead, so that Bert could see who it was.

Bert Alshuler grunted and went over and opened up. The other was still looking down the hall and frowning unhappily.

"Confound it, who was that?" he said, his voice highly testy. He was a somewhat pompous looking type, in his mid-fifties perhaps, about five and a half feet tall and too plump for his height. He had a very good tailor, a very good barber, and the briefcase he carried must have set him back a small fortune.

"Who was who?" Bert said.

"That man I just passed in the corridor."

"How would I know?" Bert said reasonably. "And just who are you?"

"You're Alshuler, aren't you?"

"That's right, but that doesn't answer my question."

"I'm a colleague of Professor Katz. You can call me Doctor Smith."

"John, I'll bet." For some reason this newcomer irritated Bert Alshuler. Possibly it was a carry-over from his last visitor. He said, "Just a minute," and went over to the phone screen on the small desk of his mini-apartment.

He sat down before it and said, "Professor Leonard Katz, please."

A robot voice said, "The number is restricted. Who is calling, please?"

"Albert Alshuler."

"Your name is listed. Thank you."

Professor Katz' face faded in, frowning.

Bert said, "You impressed me with all your hush-hush gobbledygook. Kay. A character has shown up here calling himself Doctor Smith. Do you want to identify him?"

Smith came over and looked into the screen.

"Hello, Ralph," Katz said to him, then looked back to Bert. "The doctor is one of your, ah, advisers. Anything else, Alshuler?"

"No, I suppose not, except that when I got back to my rooms here, I caught a jittery type prowling my luggage. He wanted to know what it was you wanted to see me about."

Leonard Katz looked startled. "What was his name?"

"He was a bit on the secretive side. But emphatic. He pulled a gun on me and insisted I tell him."

The professor's eyes widened. "What did you do?"

"What could I do?" Bert said sarcastically. "I offered to take it away from him if he didn't get the hell out."

Dr. Smith leaned over again and said, excitement in his voice, "As I approached this place, I saw him coming out of Alshuler's apartment…"

"Hold it," Katz said. "We'll discuss it later. Anything else, my dear Alshuler?"

"Listen, if this project of yours involves people who don't know how to handle guns, I'd like to put it on the record that it makes me nervous."

"According to your Ability Quotient tests, you don't get nervous," Leonard Katz said. He looked at Dr. Smith. "Get him out of there," he said, and evidently flicked off the phone.

Doctor Smith looked at Bert. "How long will it take you to pack?"

"About two minutes. I'm already packed. But why?"

"I haven't the time to go into details now. Please get your things and come with me."

Bert shrugged his disgust and began putting the few odds and ends he had removed from his bags, back into them. He had two medium large suitcases and a highly battered smaller one. He handed the smaller one to the self-named Doctor Smith.

"Here you are, Ralph," he said.

The other took it, as though grudgingly, possibly because it looked so very proletarian compared to his get-up. But he led the way out the door and to the elevator banks, and jittered unhappily, looking up and down the hall, while they waited.

In the elevator, he said into the screen, "Metro," and the robot voice said, "Yes, Professor Marsh."

Bert looked at him and laughed. "One hell of a cloak and dagger man you turned out to be," he said. "What's all this about?"

He who was obviously Professor Ralph Marsh, rather than Doctor Smith, John or otherwise, flushed in irritation. "I'll tell you all you are to know when we get you to your new quarters."

"What was wrong with the old ones? I was satisfied."

"You'll see."

Alshuler gave up and held his peace. Shortly, they arrived in the Parthenon Building's metro station and his guide dialed a two-seater. They put the bags in the luggage rack and took their places on the seats. Marsh dialed the little vehicle's controls and they took off through the automated underground. Bert didn't bother to ask where they were going. He was moderately surprised at himself, but then in the army he had learned to follow instructions.

They entered another metro station, took up the bags again and approached the elevator banks. Bert followed Marsh to the far end and to an elevator that seemed somewhat smaller in cubic content than the others. They stepped inside.

Marsh said, "Stand in front of the screen."

Bert's eyebrows went up a bit, but he followed orders.

Marsh said, "Albert Alshuler, now assigned to Suite G." He looked

at Bert. “Do you have any close friends who might be inclined to call on you?”

Mystified, Bert said, “I only know one person in this whole university city. I just got here a couple of days ago.”

“What is his name? Is he registered here? How long have you known him?”

“James Hawkins. He’s a sophomore. I’ve know him, let’s say five or six years.”

“Very good.” Professor Marsh looked into the screen.

“James Hawkins, registered as a sophomore, is to have access to Suite G.”

“What the hell…” Bert began.

The professor said testily, “You’ll see, you’ll see,” and to the screen, “Suite G.”

“Yes, Professor Marsh.”

Bert gave up, temporarily, at least. He was getting fed to the gills with all this razzle. He bent his knees to accommodate to the acceleration, and then again. And again. He looked at his guide. “What floor is this Suite G. on, anyway?”

“Top.”

Bert pursed his lips. He had already come to understand that the level of the floor on which you have your quarters was a status symbol even superior to what building you were in here in Mid-West University City.

“By the way, what’s the name of this building? Just in case I might want to come home some night?”

“Sarcasm does not become you, Mr. Alshuler. This is the Administration Building.”

A suite on the top floor of the Ad building. He thought they were reserved for gods.

Marsh said, as though just remembering, “This elevator is the one you will always use. The others don’t go as high as your floor. This is semi-restricted.”

Bert was suitably impressed but couldn’t think of anything to say.

The elevator began to decelerate and shortly they emerged into a swank corridor. Bert hissed appreciatively through his teeth, picked up his bags again and followed the leader. Evidently, the door screen on Suite G. was attuned to Professor Marsh. The door swung open at their approach.

Bert followed on through, down a short hall, and put his bags on the living room floor and looked around. One whole wall was glass and looked out over the valley and the mountains beyond in such a manner that none of the other buildings of the ultra-large university could be seen without coming very near to the window and the

terrace beyond.

In his time, Bert Alshuler, on leave in some of the cities of the Far East, and with his pockets heavy with accumulated pay that he had never expected to live to spend, had stopped in some of the most luxurious hostelries in the world, and some of the most expensive. However, he had never witnessed an apartment such as this, no matter what the tariff.

Marsh said, his voice condescending and a smirk on his face, "There are four of these. The university reserves them for V.I.P.s who visit us. The last occupant of this suite was the President."

"The president of what?"

"The President of the United States of the Americas," Marsh said, pompishness there. "And now, if you'll follow me."

He led the way to a side room, saying, "We've made some alterations to convert this former bedroom into a study for you. As you've probably become aware, it is sometimes preferable, particularly if you are consulting more than one reference at a time, to have your reference works in the old book form, when you are working on a screen connected with the National Data Banks, as a library booster."

He gestured with his hand.

Bert said, "Jesus."

The decor of the room was that of an English mansion's library of the 17th or 18th centuries, up to and including a small, old-fashioned bar in a corner. It had been a long time since Bert Alshuler had made a drink himself, or had one other than that supplied by an auto-bar.

The only thing off-beat, due to its modern quality, was set in the very center of the room. It was an auto-teacher.

Marsh said, "I'll instruct you on the mechanics of that."

"You won't have to. The army gave me some courses."

"All right, but this is a bit updated."

"Kay. When do we start?"

The professor looked at his wrist chronometer. "It is still morning. You have time for an hour or so of instruction before you will wish your mid-day meal. You can begin as soon as you've had your shots and pills."

Bert looked at him coldly. "What shots and pills?"

The other was fiddling with his fancy briefcase. "When I introduced myself as Doctor Smith, only one half was inaccurate. I am a doctor, you know."

"That's fine. But I've never felt better in my life."

The other ignored him and began drawing various medical equipment from his oversized case. "This has nothing to do with your health," he said. "We've already checked that out. Your health is

excellent. Disgustingly so."

"Well, I figure on letting it stay that way. What shots and pills? This wasn't in the bargain."

Even as he prepared a hypodermic, the Doctor-Professor, or whatever he was, said, "According to the information we have on you from the National Data Banks, Alshuler, you have no medical training. You would be unable to understand my terminology. Next week, or so, I'll go into it with you a bit. Meanwhile, will you lower your trousers so that I may inject this into your hip?"

Bert looked at him in frustration. "If I can't understand it now, why should I be able to next week? What does it do?"

"Confound it," the other said testily. "You'll find out in due time."

It was evidently a matter of put up or shut up. It was the time to take his stand, if he wanted to turn down this whole confusing mess. Damn it, he had come to this university to cash in on his veteran's rights to a free education of top quality. Also in the back of his mind was the fact that he had a free ride for at least eight years. Like many a long-term army man he was basically lazy. His inclination was to take life easy. It could be awfully short—you found that out in the military. The thing was, he was getting more intrigued by the minute. The triple Guaranteed Annual Income. That wealth beyond dreams of avarice gobbledygook. This suite. He assumed everything went with it. From food to liquor. He had half a mind to ask Marsh whether or not he could have a call-girl sent up. That'd probably shock the puffy old buzzard.

He said, "Kay," and began to unbuckle his belt.

The doctor was a pro. Bert Alshuler didn't even feel the injection.

The other turned and fiddled in his briefcase some more, to emerge with two rather large pill bottles, one brown, one green. He held them up to the light, for some reason or other, as if to check the contents, though as far as Bert could see, both the bottles were opaque.

Marsh said with satisfaction, "The brown ones will turn you on, the green ones, off." He began to unscrew the top of the brown bottle.

"Now wait a minute. Turn me on what?"

"You'll see."

"The hell I will. I tried charas once, in India, and I can stand without being turned on."

The other ignored him and extended a chubby hand, complete with long-sized brown pill. Bert looked at it. The hand shoved further forward.

Hell, he had already taken the shot. What was the point in chickening out at this mid-point? He took it. Marsh went over to the beautiful antique bar and brought back a glass of water.

He said, extending the glass, “Never take more than one of these at a time. Nor the green ones either, for that matter?”

“What happens if I take more than one at a time?”

“You’ll get deathly sick. I believe the military term is, you toss your cookies.”

“Maybe in your day in the military, not in mine,” Bert grumbled, but he tossed back the pill and washed it down. “Now what?”

“Now you begin your studies.”

Bert looked around the room, not being able to restrain his approval. “So this is where I do my homework, eh?”

“This is where you do all your work.”

It was time to scowl again. “How do you mean? How about my classes, my lectures, my lab work and so on?”

“Some lab work we might have, later on. You’ll have special tutors. Also, possibly a few lectures, though you can get most of these on tape, of course, if not all. But no classes.”

Bert Alshuler stared at him. “No classes? Are you completely around the bend? The whole idea is that the computers decide what courses I’m to take.”

“Courses, not classes. Now if you’ll just come over here.” Marsh led the way to the auto-teacher. He looked at his wrist chronometer again and murmured something that Bert didn’t catch, then, “Now, if I’m not mistaken, the computers have decided that your first course is this *Refresher in Mathematics from Elementary Arithmetic Through Infinitesimal Calculus*.”

Alshuler said, “It’s going to have its work cut out refreshing me in anything more advanced than high school solid geometry. That’s as far as I got and that was a long time ago.”

“It takes everything step by step, you won’t have any difficulty,” the other said with satisfaction.

“Kay. Great. But when I get to that next step, after geometry, I’m going to stumble over it and fall flat on my kisser.”

“We’ll see. Now, this button speeds things up as you go along.”

“Where’s the one that slows things down?” Bert growled.

Marsh ignored him. “If you have questions, simply speak into the screen. Go at whatever pace you wish. When you weary, take one of the green pills. Any questions?”

Bert looked at him. “Any questions? I have so damn many questions I can’t even think of the first one.”

The professor-doctor was returning things to his briefcase very briskly. “All right, ask them tomorrow. I’ll see you in the morning. I assume you know how to utilize the auto-kitchen and so forth. I hope you find your quarters satisfactory, Mr. Alshuler.”

Bert looked after him as the plump little man trotted off to the

living room and evidently the front door.

He turned back to the auto-teacher. It was obviously spanking new. He rubbed his right palm over his mouth. He supposed that he should check out the rest of the apartment, locate his bedroom and possibly do a bit of unpacking, but he was increasingly intrigued.

He sat down before the screen and activated it. A book was there. The title: *Refresher in Mathematics from Elementary Arithmetic Through Infinitesimal Calculus*. He grunted contempt of that and pressed the button that turned pages.

A voice said, "Chapter One. Elementary Arithmetic. Addition."

Bert said, "We don't have to start quite *that* elementary. I can add."

The voice, an even, firm, cultured voice but with still a mechanical something in its tone, said, "It is best to review each chapter in turn, taking the examination at the end of each before proceeding to the next. Your stylus for marking the examinations is to your right hand."

"Kay, all right," Bert grumbled.

When they said elementary arithmetic, they evidently meant elementary arithmetic. They started out with one plus one equals two. Unconsciously, Bert flicked the switch to speed things up. They went through addition, subtraction, multiplication and division in short order and before he knew it he was into elementary algebra. It had been a long time since he had done any algebra. He was surprised how well it came back to him. Once again, he was able to speed up the lesson. The pages flicked past. Once or twice in each chapter, and particularly at the tests, the screen voice brought him up. Once or twice, he asked questions on his own. The book, he realized, was very well down. Each step was absolutely clear to him before he went on to the next. It was a flow. He never hesitated. Trigonometry he had never studied before and was astonished to find how easily he went through it, amazed that he found himself speeding up the lessons still once again.

It came as a shock when he reached the end of the hook.

He sat back in his chair and stared, put down the stylus with which he had been marking the tests.

A voice, a different voice, said, "You have been credited with Math One."

Bert Alshuler blinked. It came to him, almost like a slap in the face, that he had completed a course meant to take a semester. He staggered to his feet, went over to the table on which Professor Marsh had left the two bottles and picked up the brown one and stared at it.

He looked at his watch and stared again. It was lunch time. It had been about two hours since Marsh had left. Then he scowled and

shook the wrist chronometer. Something was wrong with it. The second hand was going very slowly.

He went over to the massive mahogany desk, set in one corner, leaned over it and dialed the time on the phone screen. The time was exactly the same as his own wrist chronometer proclaimed. He looked at the watch again, uncomprehendingly. The second hand was still going at approximately one quarter or less what he would have thought normal speed.

Without thinking, he returned to the table and took up the green bottle. He opened it, shook out a pill and took it. There was still some water in the glass Professor Marsh had brought him earlier. He finished it, to wash down the pill. He felt as though in a daze. Nothing made sense. And then he realized that he felt ravenously hungry. For the first time he explored the apartment.

The balance of the suite lived up to the promise of the living room and study. It was luxurious and done in a taste that could only be thought of in terms of tomorrow.

There was a dining room, a large one, but the auto-kitchen also had a table with a serving unit and he wound up there, sitting down and flicking the switch for the lunch menu. Then something came to him. He looked at the watch again. The second hand was speeding around the face at normal rate.

"The green pills turn it off," he muttered wonderingly.

He gave his order into the screen, realizing all over again that he had an appetite greater than he could remember for years. He was ravenous.

He had assumed that the steak would be from the whale herds, but it wasn't. It was beef. Who could afford beef these days? He ate two of them, a monstrous amount of potatoes, a king-size salad and a huge dish of ice cream and strawberries.

Lunch over, he pushed the dishes and utensils onto the table's center and pressed the button that would return them to the kitchens in the bowels of the basement floors of the building.

He made his way back to the study and stared at the auto-teacher accusingly for a long moment, his hands jammed into his jacket pockets. Then he shook his head and went over to the table and got himself one of the brown pills. Something came to him and he put the pill down and returned to the auto-teacher and sat down before the screen.

He activated it and said, "What's next?"

A voice said, "Have you taken your stimulant?"

Bert said, "No. I'd like to take a crack at this without it."

"Please take your stimulant."

How in the hell can you argue with a computer's robot voice? He

glared at the screen for a moment but then got to his feet and went back for the pill.

"The brown one turns you on," he growled. "I feel like Alice In Wonderland." He began to take the pill but then thought of something. He returned to the student's chair and sank back into it and activated the screen again. "Kay. Let's go," he said.

"Have you taken your stimulant?"

"Yes."

"The next subject will be Anthropology One, Elementary Ethnology."

Bert groaned. He had a very vague idea of what anthropology was but didn't even know the definition of ethnology.

A book appeared on the screen. *Elementary Ethnology*.

The screen said, "Ethnology, the branch of anthropology which utilizes the data furnished by ethnography, the recording of living cultures, and archeology, to analyze and compare the various cultures of mankind. In short, social anthropology which evolves broader generalizations based partly on the findings of the other social sciences."

Inwardly, Bert groaned again but flicked his button to turn to Chapter One, page one.

Shortly, the voice said, "You have not taken your stimulant."

He looked at the screen in disgust. "How did you know?"

"Please take your stimulant."

Bert got to his feet and went back to where he had left the brown pill. "How could you brazen out a lie to a damn computer?"

He took the pill and returned to the student's chair and slumped down into it. "Kay," he said. "So I've taken the stimulant."

Within a few minutes he was speeding up the rate of page turning. The tests at the end of each chapter seemed irritatingly simple He wanted to get on with it. He plowed on through, speeding up, speeding up. And, once again, came to the end of the course, startled.

The screen said, "You have been credited with Anthropology One."

He sat there for a moment and stared at it. He licked his lips and said, "Kay. What's next?"

"Ancient History One. Our Oriental Heritage."

"Jesus," Bert said in resignation.

"No," the screen said. "The period previous to the emergence of the Christian ethic."

Who could expect a computer to have a sense of humor?

"Kay, let's go."

At six o'clock he called it quits and stumbled from his chair and

to the bar in the corner. He looked up at the selection of potables. It looked as though it had been chosen by a multi-millionaire Some of the Scotch was forty years old. If they wanted to woo him with forty-year-old whisky, he'd be glad to cooperate. He reached up for bottle and glass and poured himself a healthy slug, a very healthy one. The military had taught him to take his drink where he could find it and to get it down quickly before somebody, or something, changed the situation under which you could imbibe.

He held the glass up in a sarcastic toast and said, "Here's to education," and belted it down.

It was ultra-smooth, ultra-strong and had an absolutely wonderful bouquet. He had never tasted a more delicate spirit in his life. He hadn't known that strong liquor could go down so wonderfully.

He looked into his now empty glass and then at the bottle from which he had poured it and said, admiringly, "Now that's what I call whiskey."

And then he fell unconscious.

Chapter Four

He had awakened how many hours later, he didn't know. He had failed to check the time between finishing his last lesson and taking the drink. He felt nauseated, but, surprisingly, at the same time desperately hungry. He was starved. He looked out the fabulous picture window. It was pitch dark outside. He looked at his wrist chronometer. The second hand was creeping.

"Oh, oh," he said. He pushed himself to his feet, groaning, and made his way over to the table where—how many centuries ago?—Professor Ralph Marsh, the fink, had left the two pill bottles. What was it? Brown turned you on, green turned off. Oh great. He felt like one of the victims of some mad scientist type.

However, he shook out one of the green pills, knocked it back and went over to the bar for water.

He couldn't imagine getting any food into his stomach, feeling as it did, but on the other hand he was still desperately hungry It came to him that when he was stimulated, turned on, or call it whatever you will, that he burned up energy like a dynamo. Nervous energy, perhaps, but where physical consumption of energy ended and nervous began, he didn't know. In combat you could spend several days sitting in a foxhole, immobile for endless hours at a time, and come out having lost as much as ten pounds, although you had eaten reasonably well of the high energy foods the military provided.

He stumbled to the kitchen and, lacking imagination, ordered the same dishes he had eaten at lunch. He managed to get down three steaks this time. The nausea had largely disappeared after the first few bites of hot food.

He went back into the study, irritation growing in him by the minute, and sat down at the desk phone screen. He activated it and said, "Professor Ralph Marsh."

"The number is restricted. Who is calling, please?"

He grunted sarcastically. These people were really exclusive. "Albert Alshuler."

"You name is listed. Thank you."

"It had better be," he growled.

Marsh's face faded in. By the grain, he was evidently on his pocket phone and from the appearance of his image, evidently in a moving vehicle.

"Yes, Alshuler?"

Bert said, "Look. The booze in this apartment. Somebody's put a mickey in it."

"Mickey?"

“Somebody’s poisoned it. I took a slug a few hours ago and bang, passed out. I still feel a little sick.”

The other was staring at him. “But that’s impossible!”

“Great. And here I stand, wasting my time telling you fairy stories, eh?”

“How do you feel now?”

“Better. I got some food into my stomach.”

Marsh thought about it, his plump face pouting. “Well, I’ll go over it with you in the morning. I’d suggest you don’t drink anything more before then.”

Bert looked at him in disgust and switched the phone off.

He awoke at first dawn, opened one eye to take a look at the light, growled and turned over again.

But there was no sleep in him. Too much was pounding away in his mind. He got up and explored the bathroom that led off the master bedroom. It was ultramodern, as was the rest of the suite, and was well stocked with a man’s toilet articles.

He performed standard ablutions, then returned to where he had left his suitcases. He opened them in search for clean clothing but then something came to him He went over to one of the huge closets and opened it. There were at least a dozen suits, obviously brand new, inside. He turned and went over to a set of drawers and inside found a wide selection of shirts, underclothing, socks, a veritable warehouse of clothing. He had a sneaking suspicion that it would fit him. It did, suits and all, and was of a quality he had never experienced. He went on a search for shoes and found them, a score of pairs, running from dress shoes to loafers.

When he was fully dressed, he stared at himself in a full length mirror. “Beyond dreams of avarice,” he muttered.

The door screen summoned him before he had decided whether to take another of the brown pills and give his next subject a whirl.

It was the lardy Professor Marsh, as well turned out and as condescending as ever, and with oversized briefcase in hand. As soon as he was in the door, he said, “Now, what was this about being poisoned? How do you feel?”

“Better,” Bert said, leading the way back to the living room. “Listen, what’s all this about?”

“First, the alleged poisoning.”

Bert took him to the bar and indicated the Scotch. “I knocked back about two ounces of that and in no time flat, passed out like a light.”

At Bert’s nod, he removed the top, poured himself a small portion and drank it.

“You’ll be sorry,” Bert told him sourly.

But there was no reaction. Marsh said testily, “You were under the influence of the ganglioside?”

“The what?”

“The brown pill.”

“That’s right.”

“It never occurred to us. Evidently, alcohol is toxic when you are, ah, turned on.”

Bert Alshuler was indignant. “You mean to tell me you haven’t worked this out any further than that?”

“We’ll look into it further. It’s not important. Now, how far did you get yesterday?”

Bert glared at him. “Through that math, through elementary ethnology and ancient history one. If I hadn’t been bombed with that drink, I probably…”

“All right, all right,” Marsh cut him off. He bent over his briefcase and began extracting medical equipment. “You are doing even better than we had hoped.”

“Listen, who’s we, and what’s this all about?”

“All in good time.”

“All in good time, hell. I want an answer, Marsh. For all I know, this turn on, turn off stuff will turn my brain into mush after a few sessions. It’s obviously based on some psychedelic—”

“No, not exactly. We’ve gone far beyond the early psychedelics.”

“Kay. It’s not my field, but I object to being the first customer cruising through this rat maze. I want some answers. ”

The professor was loading a hypodermic nonchalantly. “I’m afraid it is not my position to tell you, Alshuler. In good time, I am sure Leonard Katz will make you privy to the fullest details.”

Bert stared bafflement at him.

“Your trousers, please,” Marsh told him.

The other ignored him and stabbed him expertly and took up another needle. “Have no fears.”

“What do you mean, have no fears? I take up a glass of whiskey and it knocks me for a loop. How do I know what comes next? You’re lousing up my metabolism, or whatever you call it First thing I know, I’ll break my arm picking my nose, or something.”

“Very amusing, I’m sure,” Marsh murmured, returning his things to his briefcase. “And now, I’ll drop in on you the same time tomorrow.”

“Wait a minute,” Bert snapped. But the other was gone.

The younger man stared after him in high irritation.

Something came to him. He reversed his engines and went into the study and took down one of the brown pills. He went to the shelves of reference books and fiddled around for a time before

coming up with the term he wanted.

He marched over to the auto-teacher, activated the screen and said, “I want a course in neuro-physiology.”

“The next course is English Literature One, Beowulf to Chaucer.”

“I’ll take that one later. I want to bone up on…”

The screen lit and there was a book there. The screen voice said, “English Literature One…”

Bert glared at it. “We’ll see about this,” he snarled and flicked the screen off, taking a childish pleasure in being able to do so.

He sat there for a while, thinking about it, then got up and went over to the desk. He sat down before the library booster screen, dialed the National Data Banks and said, “I want a listing of books in English dealing with neuro-physiology.”

The screen said, “Please put your identity card in the slot.”

“Why?” Bert demanded.

“So that we may check your priority rating, sir.”

He grunted, brought his identity card out and stuck it in the slot. A listing of books appeared on the screen. There were surprisingly few of them and, by the titles, were aimed at the layman and on a rather elementary level at that.

Bert said, “I am able to study on a higher level than this. I want the latest material on the subject.”

“Your priority rating is One. Such volumes are not available to your priority rating, sir.”

He dialed the National Data Banks again and said, “Information. What is a college student’s priority rating?”

The screen said, “To whom does a priority rating of One apply?”

“To the mentally retarded, convicted criminals, children below the age of ten and those with less schooling than the fifth grade.”

He closed his eyes in pain for a moment, then said, “*I* am Albert Alshuler Caine, Identity Number 454-K-872-R-1245. I am a discharged veteran of the Asian War, rank Major. Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, Bronze Star and Silver Star, both with clusters. There is a mistake in my National Data Banks priority rating. I wish to have it protested.”

There was a long moment before the screen said, impassively. “There is no mistake in your priority rating, sir. However, since you have protested, the matter will he investigated. You will be notified.”

Chapter Five

Well, there was nothing more he could do with the data bank foul-up at this point. He returned to the auto-teacher, sighed and sat down before the screen. “Kay,” he said. “English Literature One.”

The screen lit up and he began to flick pages.

When he had finished, he looked down at his chronometer and scowled. If anything, the second hand seemed to be going slower than ever. He wondered if this thing was accelerating. He went on to Elementary Chemistry and on completing that suddenly felt weary of it all. He took one of the green pills, sat down at the desk phone screen and gave Jim Hawkins’ identity number.

Jim’s less than handsome face faded in. He was obviously on his pocket transceiver phone. He said, “Hi, old buddy. Where’ve you been?”

“Getting over a hangover. Where are you?”

“Auto-Cafeteria 32. It’s on the ground floor of the Ad building.”

“See you,” Bert said.

In the hall, as he waited for the special elevator, he looked up and down the corridor. He could see the doors of four other suites and he wondered vaguely who lived in them. Marsh had said that this level was reserved for V.I.P.s.

On the street level, he had a little difficulty in locating the Auto-Cafeteria, since the building was largely strange to him. However, he asked questions a couple of times from passing students and found it. The students evidently took him for an instructor, his age being what it was, and possibly his conservatively cut but expensive clothing being unlike their own.

Auto-Cafeteria 32 was on the large side and even at this time of day must have held two thousand. He wandered around until he finally spotted Jim Hawkins who was sitting at a table with three others. As Bert Alshuler came nearer he recognized Jill Masterson, the perky little brunette Jim was currently hot after. The others were strangers.

Jim introduced them and last names were promptly forgotten They were named Clyde and Betty, had some classes in common with Jim—and seemed incredibly young and naive to Bert Alshuler. Why not? He was less than ten years their senior but had lived ten times the amount of life.

He had grinned a hello to Jill and she had smiled her generous smile back at him.

As he took a seat, she said, “I owe you a beer. I’m springing.”

Jim Hawkins groaned. “The second time she sees him, she’s

buying him drinks. What a sheik." He took in Bert's clothing. "Holy Moses, where'd you get the glad rags?"

"Holy Moses?" Bert said. "Glad rags? The only place I've ever heard those terms was on historic Tri-Di shows."

"The latest thing," Jim said airily.

Jill had summoned a beer for the newcomer. Now she said, "It goes in cycles The latest thing is to use the terminology of our grandfathers. Heavens to Betsy, it'll only he a matter of time before 23 Skidoo comes back in."

"*I* love my wife, but oh you kid," Bert told her, taking up the beer. He sipped it cautiously, in memory of the last drink he had taken. However, there was no subversive effect.

"Mind your language," Jim told him. "You're talking to the woman I love." He looked at Jill accusingly. "You didn't tell me that Chaucer course wasn't in English."

Bert said, "Chaucer wrote in English, Jim. It was just that it was Old English. He wrote back in the 14th Century."

Jim scowled at him. "It doesn't sound like English to me, and doesn't look like it."

"You've got to develop an ear for it, is all. For instance, take this from the *Canterbury Tales*:

> "Ful wel she soong the service dyvyne,
> Entuned in hir nose ful semely;
> After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
> For Frenssh of Parys was to her unknowe."

Jim looked at him in disgust. "That's Greek to me."

But Jill was frowning questioningly. "Bert, you just don't look like the Chaucer type."

He shrugged. "I had an opportunity to study him a little."

Clyde looked at his watch. "Hey, Betty, we've got French." The two younger students stood.

Jill got up as well. "I'll go along with you. I've got some moving to do So long, Jim. See you, Bert."

The two men left at the table looked after her as she went off, chattering brightly with the two others. She had a quick, cute charm, but there was no connotation of her being a lightweight. Her figure, tiny as it was, was perfect, and Jim sighed deep down.

Bert stood and said, "Come along, I'll buy you a real drink."

Jim uncoiled his lanky self from his chair. "A real drink? Are you kidding? I keep telling you, for as long as we're in this racket we can't even afford all the beer we'd like. Where'd you get those grand duds?"

Bert ignored the question and led the way through the mass of

tables back to the elevator row.

Jim looked at the elevator as they stood there at the end of the bank. “Hey, this isn’t for us, old buddy. This is some kind of private deal for the high mucky-mucks in the faculty.”

However, the screen had identified Bert Alshuler and the door opened. Jim followed him inside, wonderingly.

Bert said, “Suite G.”

“Yes, Mr. Alshuler.”

Jim’s eyes widened.

Bert said, “What kind of a priority does your identity card give you on the National Data Banks?”

Jim looked at him. “Three. It’s the same with all students, except some fields like medicine or nuclear physics. You’ve got to be cleared for some of the material in them.”

Bert shook his head. “Mine’s all fouled up. I’m protesting it.”

When they got to the top floor, Jim Hawkins followed him blankly as he led the way to Suite G. Several times his lips moved as though he was about to blurt a question, but he held silence. Bert Alshuler would have enjoyed the whole thing more if he hadn’t been so full of questions himself.

The door screen identified him and opened as they approached.

Jim Hawkins, hands on hips, stood in the middle of the living room and stared about.

“How in the devil did you get in here?” he demanded, “What’re you doing here?”

His war time companion led the way to the bar. “I had to promise to keep it all secret before I fell into this deal. I’m not paying for it. It’s a special arrangement with one of the professors.”

Jim shook his head in admiration. “Kind of babysitting, eh? The old boy wants kind of a guard in a place like this while he’s gone.”

“Not exactly,” Bert told him, unhappy at being less than candid with his best friend. “Anyway, how about a belt?”

“Holy smokes, he even lets you drink his liquor?”

“That’s right,” Bert said, reaching his hand out for the bottle of stone age Scotch which had laid him low the day before. “I hate to use you for the royal taster, old buddy, but how about a slug of this?”

“Why not?” Jim leered.

“Because it floored me yesterday,” Bert said, pouring the other a hefty amount.

The other chuckled amusement. “You never could hold your booze, old buddy.”

“*I* warned you.”

Bert’s lanky companion knocked the drink back with nonchalant ease, “Man,” he said, “that’s sippin’ whiskey.”

Bottle in hand, Bert watched him. Nothing happened. Bert sighed and filled the other's glass again and poured a drink for himself.

He motioned to the bar and said, "Make yourself at home, Jim. Meanwhile, lend me your Identity Card."

"What?"

"Your Identity Card. I told you mine was fouled up. I've got a priority One and I want yours to order up a book or so that I need for something I'm working on."

"It's against the law to lend your Identity Card."

Bert said, "Since when did you give a damn about the law—particularly where I'm concerned, old buddy?"

The other sighed and handed over the card.

Bert said, "I'll be an hour or so. Help yourself to the liquor. There's a library booster screen on the desk. There's one in every room in this place Do some of your homework, or look up some books, whatever. There's a king-size Tri-Di box over there."

"Take your time, take your time," Jim gushed, eyeing the bar with a fond eye.

Bert left him and went to the study. For the first time, he noticed that the door had a key on the other side. He locked the door behind him and went over to the desk with its library booster screen. He put his friend's Identity Card into the slot and dialed for the list of books on neuro-physiology.

Since he was completely at sea in the subject, he had difficulty finding what he wanted. When finally he had a book that looked promising, something came to him and he stood and went over to his bottles of pills. He took a brown one and went back to the screen.

He skimmed one book, skimmed another, got a smattering of background and terminology, but wasn't happy. His texts would mention some reference to another work which was then found to be beyond his priority Three card. It mystified him. Did you have to be a doctor of medicine, or even a specialist in this field before its full literature was available? He could see that various works in say, nuclear physics, might have to be banned to those without clearance There were evidently methods of constructing nuclear mini-bombs in a home laboratory these days and obviously the information couldn't be made available to every crackpot that came along. But medical information pertaining to the brain? Who could care that the information be available to anyone who could understand it?

Various passages gave him pause. Early in his research he ran into: "… Three major areas of excitement and progress can be detected among the numerous enquiries in the field. First, there is a growing power to intervene in the non-intellectual functions of the brain: a growing ability to alter moods and emotional states—a

development which is based on the realization that the brain is not simply an electrical or computer-like mechanism, but a complex chemical system as well. Secondly, a spirit of extreme optimism has sprung up concerning the possibility of discovering the nature of memory. Finally, there is a guarded belief that one may be able to effect considerable improvement in the level of intelligence of future generations.

He sat back for a moment and ran the palm of his right hand over his lips. The passage had been written more than two decades previous.

Later on, he came up with: "… the brain is a complex chemical device. Its parts respond in subtle ways to the influence of substances in the fluids which bathe them, and contain specialized chemical agents—gangliosides, cerebrosides, sphingomyelin and so on—the functions of which are still obscure."

He finally looked at his wrist chronometer. He couldn't leave Jim Hawkins alone indefinitely. The other was probably already wondering what Bert was doing so long with his Identity Card. The second hand on his watch seemed to be barely crawling. He snorted inwardly and realized that he hadn't checked the time when he had first entered the study, so he didn't know how long he had been at his books. He had better return.

He went over to his pills and took one of the green ones and then unlocked the door and returned to the living room.

Jim Hawkins was at one wall, glass in hand and staring owlishly at a display set in the wall that Bert Alshuler hadn't realized was there. Evidently, the other had opened some panel that had been sunken in such a way that a casual inspection wouldn't indicate its presence.

Bert came up behind him. "What's this?" he said.

Jim, frowning, said in gentle reproof, "Old buddy, didn't you know it was illegal for private citizens to possess laser weapons?"

Chapter Six

"Laser weapons?"

Bert stared into the case. There were, neatly displayed, a dozen firearms, ranging from gyro-jet pistols and carbines, to, yes, two laser pistols and even a folding type laser rifle. To Bert's experienced eye, the latter seemed on the sophisticated side, more compact than the arms with which he'd been familiar in the Asian War. Evidently, the very latest.

"Maybe they're just models," he said, reaching out for the larger of the lasers.

Jim, who was looking a little blurry around the edges as a result of the sampling of the bottled goods, snorted. "With that machining?"

His old comrade in arms handled the weapon professionally, expertly. He slapped the side and dislodged the power pack. There was a red dot at the top.

Jim muttered, "Loaded." He looked at the other laser hand guns "There's enough firepower here to bring down half of this building. And look at that supply of extra power packs; ammo enough to stand off a division."

Bert put the folding rifle back into its place. He said unhappily, "The professor told me that the suites upon this level were for V.I.P.s. The last occupant of this one was the president himself. I suppose they get a lot of visiting foreign dignitaries, that sort of thing. Maybe the Department of Security has this little cache here for emergencies."

"Some little cache," Jim said skeptically.

Bert looked at the tiny keyhole in the secret door, then at his companion. "How'd you find this, and how'd you ever get the lock open?"

Jim looked innocent. "Didn't I ever tell you what I did before the army snagged me?"

"No."

"I was an apprentice second story man."

"Second story man? What in the hell's that? More of your grandfather's slang?"

"Secondary story man, second story man; a burglar."

Bert winced. "My old buddy," he murmured. "What'd you mean, apprentice?"

"It runs into the family," Jim told him earnestly. "My old man was breaking me in."

"Oh, great. I thought the army didn't induct felons."

"Felon?" Jim said indignantly. "We weren't amateurs. My family hasn't taken a fall in three generations. There's nothing on my police

record any worse than a couple of traffic violations."

Bert was intrigued, in spite of himself. "Well, now that the war's over, how come you're here in school on a lousy Guaranteed Annual Income set-up?"

Jim nodded "My old man's teed off, sort of like I was betraying the family traditions, but the fact in crime doesn't pay any more. Not enough, at least. The flatfeet."

"The who?"

"The fuzz, the coppers, the police. My grandfather used to call 'em flatfeet. Anyway, they're so advanced today it's a hazard. Besides, with the Universal Credit Identity Card and the cashless-checkless exchange system, you can't gloam, uh, swipe, uh, put the snatch on."

"Kay, kay. I get the import."

"Cash money. And with the computers and the National Data Banks it's practically impossible to fence jewelry or any other items of much value." A slightly indignant element came into Jim Hawkins' voice. "They've automated us right out of business. "

Bert Alshuler closed the door of the arms cache with a sigh. He said, "So you're a retired apprentice burglar. Just take it easy from now on keeping your hand in practice around my digs, old buddy, old buddy."

"I'll try to remember," Jim said penitently. "Listen, this booze is beginning to work on me. What do you say we look up Jill and get her to dig up a friend and we'll go out on the town tonight. You haven't been shown the entertainment spots the area offers. I got all checked out last year."

Bert led the way back to the bar, saying, "Dig up a friend? What kind of corpses does Jill associate with?"

"Aw, they're not as bad as all that," Jim protested.

Bert Alshuler thought about it as he made them a final drink for the road. Why not? He had spent so much time the past two days sitting at the auto-teacher that he felt a little relaxation was in order. Besides, admit it, he wouldn't mind seeing a little more of Jill, even though she would be Jim's date rather than his own. He had the feeling that his attraction to her was reciprocated.

The drinks down, they made their way to the suite's door, talking about army acquaintances they had lost track of in the short time that had elapsed since they had been in Asia.

Jim Hawkins was saying, "What the devil ever happened to Dick Ruhling and Pirtle?" as they emerged into the corridor and came to an abrupt halt.

Down the hall, a dozen yards or so, another group was emerging from the neighboring suite. There were four men and a girl and she was putting up a worthy fight considering that she was only pint-sized

and had a man on each arm and a tape over her mouth.

The girl was Jill Masterson.

Jim Hawkins blurted, “Come on!” and his lanky, always lazy-like body exploded forward, his arms extended in a karate attack readiness, a *Kiai* yell blasting from his throat.

Bert was immediately behind, fading slightly to the left to give operating room. But they skidded to a halt. One of the four had come up with a handgun.

He snarled, “Get out of here, you two. This is a private matter.”

“You ain’t just a whistlin’ Dixie,” Jim Hawkins snapped, his right hand blurring for his belt, his legs spread and slightly crouched in a practiced gunman’s stance, his left arm extended to the left and forward for balance.

The eyes of the armed kidnapper widened and he fired, went far off aim, fired again, and Jim Hawkins’ gun arm went limp.

He grunted pain and snapped, “Killer! Catch!” and obviously with a supreme effort flicked the gun in Bert’s direction.

Bert Alshuler, in much the same stance as his wartime comrade had assumed, caught it in mid-air There was no need to flick off the safety, nor to depress the range stud, Jim would have already done that automatically.

The gunman was swinging his gyro-jet pistol around to bring it to bear on his new foe.

Bert muttered, “Tyro,” even as he burnt the man’s face off. The other’s last act in life was to scream agony.

The elevator door was open and the others, dragging Jill with them, were backing into it, their faces in full alarm.

He couldn’t fire, not with anything as sweeping as a laser beam. Inadequately, Bert yelled, “Halt!” dashing forward.

The elevator door slammed shut, just as Bert crashed against it. He made two steps back, in frustration, yelling over his shoulder, “How bad?”

Jim Hawkins, leaning against a wall, his face pale, said, “Not too bad. Double entry, side and right arm. I’m okay… *get them*!”

Bert snatched his pocket phone from his jacket pocket, nipped the lid open with his thumb, pressed the activating stud and snapped, “Emergency! Building Security Four men have just kidnapped a girl from the top floor of the Administration…”

He came to a halt and glared down at the instrument The screen was a blur. He ran over to his companion. “Where’s your phone?”

“In my right pocket. I can’t get at it.”

Bert grabbed at the pocket, brought forth the other’s phone and opened it. He flicked the stud, flicked it again. The screen remained a blur.

Jim groaned, “They’ve got some kind of a musher around.”

The other’s eyes darted up and down the corridor “It has to be a portable. It can’t be too…”

Jim was pointing with his left hand at the crumpled corpse. “It has to be on him. It can’t be anywhere else, unless it’s in that apartment they just came out of.”

Bert bent over the body, frisking it rapidly, ignoring the mess that was the former gunman’s head. Bert Alshuler had seen blood and gore before. He came up finally with an electronic device, slammed it to the floor and ground his heel down on it.

He brought his pocket phone out again and opened it, but then looked up at the elevator and shook his head in despair. “They’re already gone.”

Jim said urgently, “Try it anyway.”

But Bert said, “No No, they’re willing to shoot. Why, I wouldn’t know. They’re willing to shoot and they’ve got Jill. Besides, I doubt if whatever Security officers a building like this has ordinarily go around heeled.”

He stood, his face agonized, and tried to think. He looked at his friend. “How are you?”

“Dripping a little ink, but I’m better now. Those rocket slugs pack a wallop, but he didn’t nick me bad.”

Bert said, “Come on back into the suite. They must have some kind of a medical kit in the bathroom. They’ve got everything else.”

The door identity screen picked them up and opened.

Bert led his companion into the bath of the master bedroom and helped him strip off jacket and shirt. The double wound didn’t look too bad. He had seen Jim shot up considerably worse than this He fumbled around in the medical chest set into the wall and came up with iodine, bandages and tape.

Jim growled, “I can handle it. Get going on Jill.”

Bert went back into the living room and sat before the phone screen there. He flicked it on and said, “Professor Ralph Marsh. Restricted. I’m listed. Albert Alshuler.”

“Thank you.”

The professor’s face faded in after a moment. He was petulant. “What is it this time, confound it? I’d think…”

“Shut up and listen. I’m in Suite G. We’ve just had a shoot-out. One man’s dead and one wounded. Get up here soonest with a medical kit.”

The other’s eyes were bugging. “Are you jesting?”

“Do I look like a clown? Get up here, damn it. A friend and I jumped four men who were kidnapping Jill Masterson, a girl who—”

“Jill Masterson!”

Chapter Seven

"Oh, so you know her, eh?" Bert said grimly. "Get up here and bring some muscle along. We've got problems, Marsh, and you'd better have some answers" Bert slapped the phone off.

He leaned back in the chair, trying desperately to think.

Jim Hawkins came in, trying to button a clean white shirt he had evidently appropriated from those in the master bedroom that Bert had discovered that morning. Bert got up and helped him. The shirt was a poor fit.

Bert said, "We've got to get that stiff out of the hall. Evidently, there's nobody else living in this part of the building or they would've come out when that gyro-jet went off. However, you never know when somebody might come along. Where in the hell did you get that laser pistol? As though I didn't know, you damn crook." He began to lead the way back to the hall.

Jim was aggrieved. "What if we hadn't had it? I had a feeling that something was off-beat. You being in this suite with your fancy clothes and fancy hooch and all the rest of it. Besides, ever since I got out of the army I've felt half naked going around without being heeled I just thought I'd borrow it for a while."

Bert growled, "Great. But now we're up on the top floor of this building with a corpse on our hands, a corpse killed with a highly illegal laser gun. And we've got one whale of a suspicious story to explain it all."

Out in the hall, he went over to the body, took it by the heels and dragged it back in the direction of Suite G. Jim Hawkins bent down and picked up the shattered electronic device. Frowning at it, he re-entered the apartment, closing the door behind him.

Bert Alshuler put a small throw rug under the head of the dead man so that the blood wouldn't stain the foyer floor and bent over the body again, shaking it down more completely than he had before.

He finally came to his feet in disgust "No Identity Card, no wallet, no nothing."

Jim had been inspecting the electronic device. He said, "Look at this, Bert. It's jury-rigged." He held forth the compact but awkward appearing musher.

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it's obviously not government issue. They don't have any this small. Dad and I used to use them in our business. But they don't make mini-mushers in this country, so we had to get them illegally from Japan. You set one up when you're on a job. It prevents anybody from calling for help in case you're flushed while you're stripping an

apartment or whatever."

"I don't get it," Bert said.

"It's home-made. Looks like some amateur put it together in some little electronic shop, or maybe a basement hobby-room—or, better still an electronic lab in some school."

Bert scowled. "I see your drift. Those guys weren't pros, Jim. That one that nicked you didn't know guns. He missed the first time, even at that range And if he'd been up on being a gunman he would have gotten me too. Besides that, pros wouldn't have sent four men to pick up a girl no bigger than Jill. Makes it too conspicuous. One or two would have been plenty. And there's one other thing."

"What's that?"

"They were all kids. Young fellows." He dropped the subject. "Listen. Do you think you could get into that suite next to us? You haven't got the use of your right mind."

"Let's give it a try."

They left the apartment again and made their way to the door from which Jill had emerged with her abductors less than fifteen minutes before.

Jim said, "Stand to one side. Don't let the identity screen pick you up. Devil only knows what kind of an alarm system they have rigged with a joint as classy as this."

Bert Alshuler stood with his back to the wall, as Jim Hawkins, also taking care to keep out of the screen's range, worked on it. He had brought a pocket knife forth which seemed to be a miniature tool kit.

He grinned over his shoulder at his companion. "Carry a burglar kit around with you and if somebody searches you, you've had it. But you can have one of these and everybody just figures you're gadget-happy."

Bert rolled his eyes upward, in a plea to the gods. "My old buddy," he muttered.

The screen evidently disposed of, Jim went to work on the lock. He said, to nobody in particular, "If they'd automate doors completely, it'd be another thing, but they've got it half and half, on the off-chance of a breakdown."

The door swung open and they both hurried inside and closed it after them.

The suite was considerably similar to that occupied by Bert Alshuler, with the difference that it had obviously been meant for female occupancy.

In the living room were half a dozen suitcases. Bert bent over them. He looked up. "Locked."

Jim snorted at that and bent over each momentarily, his gadget

pocketknife in hand. “There you are.”

Bert opened the largest and fumbled through it. There were various papers and documents among the feminine clothing and toilet articles.

Jim said, “It’s Jill’s stuff, all right. She was evidently just moving in. Hadn’t the time to unpack.” He paused. “She mentioned something about moving. But what in the hell would she be doing in a place like this? She was over in the Parthenon Building, watching her credits, just like the rest of us. She couldn’t afford to stay in a place like this for one day.” He looked suspiciously at Bert. “For that matter, what are you doing here?”

Bert Alshuler had been going through the rest of Jill’s things, trying to find some clue, but he drew a blank.

He stood and looked into his friend’s eyes “I can’t tell you.”

“The devil you can’t, old buddy. Start talking.”

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t, damn it, Jim. I said I can’t I don’t *know* what I’m doing here. It’s a madhouse. But I know one thing. I’m going to get a lot of explanations in the near future. Come on, let’s get back into the other suite. Our alleged friends should be turning up. How do you feel?”

They went on back to Suite G and to the bar in the living room. They had hardly poured a couple of straight drinks before the screen on the door pinged. Bert went to get it.

Professor Ralph Marsh bustled in, followed by two others who had been stamped from the same mold. That is, they were in their late fifties, or early sixties, were conservatively dressed and obviously from the professional class. The second two were on the nervous side, and very unhappy.

But Marsh snapped to Bert, “All right, all right, confound it. What is this, what is this?”

Bert closed the door behind them and indicated the body stretched out on the foyer floor. “You tell me, friend.”

The professor stared down at the dead man.

“Who is that?”

Bert was disgusted He said sarcastically, “How would I know? You people haven’t told me a damn thing. I can’t tell the good guys from the bad guys without some sort of program. Come on into the living room and start talking.” He led the way.

At the entry Professor Ralph Marsh pulled up short at the sight of Jim Hawkins, who leered at him from the bar upon which he leaned.

“Who is that?” Marsh blurted.

“That,” Bert said, “is Mr. James Hawkins. Late captain in the Asian War and my long time comrade in arms.”

“What have you told him?”

"What the hell could I tell him? I don't know anything. Who are these jokers?" Bert indicated Marsh's two companions with a thumb and they looked slightly apprehensive. "I told you to bring some muscle. This is muscle in your books?"

Marsh said testily, "It is not important who they are, as of the moment. And what do you mean, muscle?" He looked at Jim "You've been wounded?"

"Many times," Jim Hawkins said laconically. "Most recently, this afternoon."

Marsh said to his lead companion, who carried a doctor's bag, "David, that is, Doctor Smith, take a look at him."

Bert said, "You used Smith before. I'm beginning to suspect you haven't much imagination, Marsh."

The other ignored him and the new Doctor Smith led Jim into the bathroom.

Marsh said, "Where is Miss Masterson?"

"I told you," Bert said. "As we were leaving this apartment, we ran into Jill in the corridor, coming from the next suite. Four young goons were hustling her along. We jumped them. One of them plugged Jim. I plugged him. The rest got away with Jill. We couldn't call for help quickly enough since they had a musher on in the vicinity."

"A musher?"

"As I said before, some cloak and dagger man you've turned out to be. A musher is an electronic device that smothers any bug, transceiver, or any other transmitter or receiver in its vicinity."

"Bug?"

"Oh, shut up. Listen, Jim and I are in the soup. You've got to get rid of that stiff out in the foyer. Then you're going to have to sit down and tell me a few things. Jill was in on the same deal I am, wasn't she? Katz said there *was* another student acting as a control."

Professor Marsh said stubbornly, "I can't tell you."

"The hell you can't, friend."

Marsh turned and said to his remaining companion, "Make arrangements for the disposal."

"Now wait a minute," Bert said. "What do you figure on doing? I can just see you parading through the lobby with…"

Marsh looked at him peevishly. "We are not without resources. The doctor is… that is, he has access to the Medical College of this university city."

Bert looked at him blankly.

Marsh said, his voice impatient. "Your… victim, Alshuler, will be utilized in the dissecting room in the surgery department as a cadaver."

The third of the trio said to Bert, in a somewhat timorous voice,

“Give me a hand.”

Bert followed him into the foyer, mystified. The other opened the suite’s door. In the hall was a hospital cart of the type utilized to transport patients to and from surgery. Bert stood aside as the doctor—he assumed he was a doctor—pushed the wheeled stretcher into the foyer and then helped him to raise the corpse onto it. The other stretched a white sheet over the dead man. Bert picked up the bloodied rug he had put under the body’s head and stuck it under the sheet as well.

Something came to him and he picked up a hospital towel from the cart, went out into the corridor and swabbed up the blood there, to the best of his ability. He returned to the suite and stuck the towel under the sheet.

He looked at the doctor. “You really think you can get this over to your medical school?”

The man jittered unhappily but squeaked, “Yes.”

“What’s in all this for you?”

The other shook his head.

In disgust, Bert went back into the living room. Jim was at the bar again, his right arm immobilized in a sling.

Bert Alshuler looked at Marsh. “Kay. What about Jill Masterson?”

“We’ll immediately do what we can.”

“That’s not enough. Who has her?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“What was she doing here?”

“As you’ve already mentioned, the same thing you were.”

“What am I doing?”

“See here, Alshuler, you took this assignment and pledged yourself to silence.”

“That’s not enough now, obviously. We want Miss Masterson back… safely.”

“In spades,” Jim said, his voice even.

Marsh suppressed irritation “Very well, Alshuler. I’ll go over all this with Professor Katz and undoubtedly he will go into it further with you tomorrow. He is out of town today.” Marsh made a motion with his head toward Doctor Smith. “We had better be on our way.” He looked at Bert. “Meanwhile, do nothing further in this regard.”

Jim rapped, “Who in the devil were those guys that snatched Jill?”

Marsh looked at him. “I’ve already told you I don’t know. Even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you. Come along, David.”

Doctor Smith followed him.

When they were gone, Jim said, “Who were they?”

Bert shook his head. “You know almost as much as I do. I got into

this because they promised me a nice financial deal. I decided it was some sort of new departure in teaching, involving speeding up the brain so you can learn faster and evidently retain more of what you assimilate. Now I don't know what the hell it is."

Jim said, "They couldn't have snatched her for money. She didn't have any. She was on Guaranteed Annual Income, just like you and me."

"I think I've got one possible lead," Bert said, heading for the phone screen. "Give me your Identity Card."

Jim handed it over.

Bert Alshuler put the card in the slot and said, "I would like the faces and names of all professors in this university city."

Chapter Eight

Jim leaned over his shoulder. “What’s going on?”

“I’m looking for somebody I had a run-in with yesterday morning. He might be connected with this gang.”

It was a lengthy process. There were a good many full professors in an educational institution of this magnitude. It was a lengthy process and without result. Bert grunted disgust.

He thought for a while and said, “He was too young to be a full professor anyway and, into the screen, “I would like the faces and names of all the assistant professors and instructors in this university city.”

The faces began to flash before him again, alphabetically, as before. He drew pay dirt in the Ks. His mysterious visitor was named Kenneth Kneedler.

He said into the screen, “University Information, please. Let me have what is available to students on Assistant Professor Kenneth Kneedler, I am considering taking one of his classes.”

The screen said, “Yes, Mr. Hawkins.”

Kenneth Kneedler taught several courses in political economy, including one on Communism.

“Communism,” Jim snorted. “In this country? In a government-run university?”

Bert said into the screen, “University Information, please Where is Assistant Professor Kenneth Kneedler, at the present?”

“In his office. Administration Building, floor forty-three, Office Number 385.”

Bert came to his feet and jerked his head at his companion. “Come on over here and open this case for me.” He led the way to the panel behind which was hidden the collection of weapons.

“Now you’re talking,” Jim growled. He brought forth his oversized pocketknife.

Bert shrugged out of his jacket and took up one of the shoulder rigs and two spare power packs. He began to work into the quick-draw holster. Jim reached out and appropriated the remaining laser pistol and tucked it into his belt on the right side of his body.

Bert said, “What do you think you’re going to do with that?” He brought the gun he had used against the kidnapper from the hip pocket in which he had been carrying it, and slipped it into the holster.

Jim said, “I’m coming with you.”

“The hell you are. Not in your condition. You stay here and get some rest.”

Jim looked at him stonily.

Bert grumbled, “Kay. Come on.”

They went out into the corridor again and summoned the elevator. Bert told him about the disposal of the body and also described his run-in with Kneedler.

Jim said, “So that body will wind up with some kid medical student butchering it tomorrow. Some professors.”

They took the elevator down to the forty-third floor, Jim wincing in pain at the precipitate drop. There were few persons in the corridors. When they found Office Number 385, they stood to one side, against the wall, and pretended to be deep in conversation, until the hall was temporarily clear.

Bert said slowly, “This joker knows me. He might not open up if he saw my face on the door screen. We’ll go in fast, not giving him a chance to yell for help. You cover *my* back and the door.”

Jim loosened the pistol in his belt, and nodded. Bert brought forth his own laser gun, flicked the stud flown to shortest range, stepped forward quickly and burned out the door’s lock. He threw his shoulder against the panel and burst through, Jim immediately behind.

In the middle of the room, a sheaf of papers which he was scanning in his hand, stood Bert Alshuler’s demanding visitor of the morning before.

Even as Jim slammed the door shut behind them, Bert had moved forward at full speed. Before Kneedler’s eyes had time to widen in surprise, the former combat man was upon him. He’ grabbed Kneedler by his jacket front with both hands and dashed him backward toward the wall of the room’s far side, all but lifting him bodily from the floor.

He smashed him brutally against the wall, so that the other’s head was so shaken that his contact lenses popped from his eyes and dropped to the floor. Bert snarled, “Where’s Jill Masterson?”

“What… what…!”

Bert Alshuler smashed him in the mouth with his right fist, mashing his lips, loosening several of his teeth.

“Where’d you bastards take Jill Masterson?”

The other tried to struggle, but the fear in him made his less than muscular body even more inadequate against his aggressive attacker.

Bert Alshuler, his face cold as bleak death, took his right forefinger and jammed it up into one of the writhing man’s nostrils, raising him up to tiptoe in agony. He squealed.

Bert snarled, “Now listen, Kneedler, listen real good, because you’re almost dead right now. Some guys think they can’t be made to talk. They’d rather die, they think. But they’re wrong. Anybody can be broken. It’s not pretty. But anybody. Believe me, I know. Jim here,

and I, are experts. We got to be experts the hard way."

"I won't… I won't."

It was all the admission that Bert Alshuler wanted. He kneed the man brutally, and let him drop to the floor.

"Real tough, ain't he?" Jim said pleasantly. He was leaning against the door.

It was a full five minutes before the fallen man tried to bring himself to his hands and knees, even as he groaned. Bert Alshuler kicked him in the side, flattening him again.

Jim said, "Hey, Bert, that one was pretty good. I think you got at least three ribs. You going to kill him?"

Bert said, "Not yet. How'd you think we ought to do it, Jim?"

Jim said easily, "Oh, some way not too simple. I don't much like characters that rough up little girls."

The other on the floor spluttered through broken mouth and teeth, "Miss… Miss Masterson is in no physical danger."

Bert kicked him again.

Jim said in mild protest, "Easy, Bert, you don't want to kill him until we know where Jill is."

Their victim was breathing in desperate gasps He said, "Please… please. I'll tell you… I'll tell you. No danger… she's in no danger."

"Yeah," Jim said. "Your boys aren't playing for keeps. This slug I took in my side was all fun and games."

Bert reached down and grabbed Kneedler by the jacket collar and hauled him to his feet. He pulled him so close that their faces almost touched.

"Where is she?"

"In… in a house on the outskirts… outskirts of town."

Bert looked at Jim. "We can't leave him here… alive. He might get in touch with somebody. And if we tie him, somebody might come in and let him loose."

"Please… please… I'm not lying."

Bert snarled at him. "You're damn right, you're not lying. You'd better not be. "He said to Jim, "We'll have to take him along."

Jim looked at their victim critically. "Golden boy's not in any too good a shape to be seen on the streets."

Bert let go of the man and brought a handkerchief from his pocket. "Here. Hold this over your mouth, as though you have a toothache."

"My… my glasses."

"The hell with your glasses. I prefer you blind. Jim, lead the way Back to that semi-private elevator. There won't be anybody else in it."

They made a parade down the hall, Jim going first.

Bert bringing up the rear. They passed only half a dozen persons,

all of them too preoccupied with their own thoughts to notice anything strange. Assistant Professor Kenneth Kneedler was evidently too demoralized to attempt an appeal for assistance.

Bert Alshuler could almost, but not quite, feel pity for the man. Not more than five minutes ago, he had been in the security of his private office, some university paper work in hand. Now he was a broken, terrified man in the hands of what he must have thought homicidal maniacs, expecting, at best, sudden death. All his plans, all his schemes, forgotten. Survival the only thing in him, his only desire. It was the brutal suddenness of it all that had broken him. It had been a gamble but it had paid off.

In the elevator, Bert said, “Metro, please.”

“Yes, Mr. Alshuler.”

They had to move fast now, while the other remained demoralized. They couldn’t afford to give him the opportunity to erect new defenses. They couldn’t give him the chance to reason out the fact that they wouldn’t kill him, wouldn’t dare kill him. Not in this age of ultra-modern police methods. The kidnapper had been one thing, but you didn’t abduct a professor from his office and take him out and destroy him without leaving clues behind. Among others, there was, in the data banks, a record of the fact that someone had searched out Kenneth Kneedler’s name, appearance and where he was immediately before his disappearance. And that someone had used the Identity Card of James Hawkins.

No, they wouldn’t kill him, even it that had been their desire. And it wasn’t. They needed him alive.

Chapter Nine

In the metro, in view of the fact that they were leaving the automated system of the university city, Bert Alshuler summoned an electro-steamer with manual controls. The three of them crowded into the front seat, Bert behind the wheel.

He said to the browbeaten teacher, making his voice dangerous, "Kay. What are the coordinates of the house on the outskirts?"

The other hesitated and Jim Hawkins backhanded him across his swollen mouth. Kneedler winced in pain and answered.

Jim said to Bert, "Your best city entry would be the southwest. That'd be Number Eight."

Bert put his Identity-cum-Credit Card in the car's screen slot and dialed the entry. He had been in a hurry to set the coordinates of the house before their captive had recovered any further. Kneedler was obviously no man of action. His life was not such that he was accustomed to violence, even though he had carried a gun the day before. However, Bert Alshuler was also unfamiliar with what motivated the man but suspected it was an ideological reason, no matter how mistaken. If so, the other might at any time strengthen and become difficult so far as further information was concerned. And information was what they were in particularly dire need of.

The vehicle smoothed into the underground traffic and Bert leaned back in his seat.

lie said conversationally, "So you teach communism, eh? It's been a long time since I met a commie here in the United States of the Americas."

Kneedler said through puffed lips, which he was presently trying to clean up with the handkerchief, "You don't have to be a communist to teach communism, any more than you have to be an American to teach early American history."

Jim said with a chuckle, "Our boy is getting chipper, real chipper. Maybe I'd better knock out a few more of his teeth, just to keep him in line."

The teacher cringed. "Please… I'm badly hurt."

Which he wasn't, Bert thought inwardly. He didn't know what being badly hurt was. He had never been exposed to it. Jim was probably in considerably more pain —unless that doctor friend of Marsh's had given him a shot. But Jim in his time had taken many a hit. Not that you ever got used to being hit, but you learned to ride with it.

"So you're not a communist?" Bert said.

The other took a deep breath. "You might keep in mind that you

can't fight a thing effectively if you don't understand it. In my classes, I try to keep without prejudice, either… either way. In the past, many universities didn't even have a copy of *Das Kapital* in the library, evidently afraid students might read it. I teach communism right from the days of Marx and Engels down to today's Number One in the Soviet Complex, and whatever you might call the present socio-economic system that prevails over there. I have no idea if any of my more intelligent students are subverted by what they learned in my class. I doubt it."

Bert said suddenly, "Why was Jill Masterson kidnapped?"

"I… can't tell you."

Jim said, looking at him benignly, "You're beginning to irritate me a little again, buddy. Now, I picked up a little trick a few years ago that involves ramming a sharp pencil down a man's ear. You'd be surprised at the effects. For one thing, later he can't hear out of it so good any more."

It was a new one to Bert Alshuler and he suspected that it was new to Jim too, but he held his peace. They had to keep this customer under a condition of intimidation if they were going to get any more out of him. He was inwardly amused at the fact that Kneedler had crowded over a little in his direction, to get as far away from Jim Hawkins as possible.

"Can't tell, or won't?" Bert said.

They had arrived at the entry and the vehicle came to a halt on the dispatcher. Bert took over the controls manually, and they merged onto an open road. He flicked on the map screen and dialed the coordinates the other had given him. The appropriate map faded in, a red cross marked on the house that was his destination.

He said to Kneedler, "Come, come, friend."

Kneedler said, "Miss Masterson is in no danger. She has simply been… been taken to a place where the true nature of Katz and his clique can be explained to her. But I warn you that the men she is with are dedicated and will put up with no interference from you."

"Oh, they won't, eh?" Bert said grimly. "Kay. Well just keep that in mind."

"Who's Katz?" Jim said.

Bert said, "Professor Leonard Katz. I'll tell you more about him later." He turned back to Kneedler. "Go on, friend. This all sounds so cozy. Just wanted a little talk with Jill. Unfortunately, there's already one man dead, and Jim, here, was nicked a bit. Your explanations better improve."

From the side of his eyes, he could see the other tighten up. He was beginning to regain some of his lost confidence.

Kneedler said stubbornly, "I tried to warn you, too."

"No, you didn't. You tried to browbeat me into telling you what Katz wanted of me."

Jim said, "We're coming up on this place."

Bert said, "Kay. Well use the old house-to-house, clean-up deal. You blast the door down, I'll go in shooting." He looked at Kneedler. "You stay in the car. Don't try to make a break for it, or Jim will gun you down. These are laser pistols we're carrying. Jim's a crack shot, but he doesn't have to be with a laser beam. He could cut you down a couple of blocks away and several of the houses in the vicinity along with you. Understand?"

"I… I understand. I've read about laser weapons."

"Good. Jim, I'm going to drive up as near as I can get to the front door. Move fast. We don't know what sort of defenses they might have."

"I know, I know," Jim said. "Holy smokes, I thought we'd gone through this routine for the last time."

Bert Alshuler made out the house for which they were heading. It was one of various smaller constructions built for those who rebelled against living the ant-like existence of the high-rise buildings in the university city proper. All very fine, if you could afford it.

There was a short stretch of lawn, two steps that led up to a small porch. There were three windows on the front of the house If there had been an armed guard posted at any of them, he and Jim would have had it.

However, once again, he was of the opinion that these adversaries were amateurs. Hell, practically anybody was an amateur compared to him and to Jim.

He came up fast, slammed up against the curb, jammed on the brakes. He and Jim bolted out of the car, and they dashed, zig-zagging and crouching almost double as combat men run under fire, for the door.

Jim bounced to one side when he reached the entry. He aimed the laser and burnt off doorknob and lock. Bert hit the door with his shoulder, slammed on through and kept on the move. A very short hallway. Down it as fast as he could go, the pistol extended.

Into a living room, into the center of the room, moving fast. There were two men there, one seated with a book, one in the process of entering through a far door. Their eyes popped at him. Leaning up against the wall next to the seated one, was a rifle. He reached for it—far too slowly.

Bert burned him down.

The other made a dash for a table in the room's center. There was an old-fashioned revolver on it. Bert cut him nearly in two, and the body crashed to the floor, upsetting and crumbling a straight chair on

his way down.

Bert kept moving, the gun ever at the ready. He yelled, “Jill!”

There was a door that would seemingly lead to a bedroom. It opened and another man came dashing in. Even at the speed with which things were developing, Bert Alshuler recognized him as one of the four who had abducted Jill Masterson. He blasted him in the belly, let the laser beam mount higher. The newcomer folded forward and collapsed to the floor.

“Jill!” he yelled.

A voice from the room from which his last adversary had emerged called shakily, “In here!”

He didn’t know if she was alone. He bounced through the door, into the room’s center, swinging the gun around as he whirled. But she was alone, seated on the bed, her eyes wide.

“How many of them in the house?” he barked.

“Three. What’s happened?”

“Jim Hawkins and I came to get you. Jim’s outside, covering. Come on, let’s get out of here. Close your eyes when we go through the living room. It’s messy. I’ll take your arm.”

But she seemed rooted to where she sat. Her eyes were still round.

As though by intuition she said, very slowly, “Jim Hawkins. Jim’s outside covering. James Hawkins. Captain James Hawkins of the Elite Service. The right hand man of… he called you Killer. Why… why you’re *Killer Caine*.”

His face stiffened slightly. “My mother’s name was Alshuler. I took it to avoid… notoriety. Let’s go, Jill. I think you’re safe, but it’s just possible that there’re more of them in the vicinity.”

“But what are you doing here? How are you connected with this whole affair?”

He said urgently, “Listen. We don’t have time for explanations. I’m evidently in the same thing you are. Katz told me I ran up the highest Ability Quotient of all the demobilized military, so I was picked for this educational project. Let’s go.”

But she was still staring, and there was a sick expression on her face. She said, very slowly. “Ability Quotient? You, the highest of all discharged men? The millions of them? In what field is your real greatest ability. Killer Caine?”

PART TWO

Chapter Ten

In the hallway, near the door, Bert Alshuler paused, stood to one side, drew a curtain at one of the windows a bit and peered out. Jim was leaning nonchalantly on one of the porch pillars, his pistol evidently back in his belt.

Jill said coldly, "How does one acquire a name like Killer Caine?"

He shot her a look. "It starts as a gag. A couple of your buddies call you that once or twice for laughs."

He threw the power pack of his pistol and dropped it into his left pocket and brought forth a fresh one from his right jacket pocket.

He said, "Then one day you're in the middle of a big fire fight and just by chance the news boys have a camera on you. Not that you give a damn at the time. All you're interested in is getting through the razzle alive. Later on, when it's over, one of the newsmen comes over to get your name and a little interview. So he hears one of your squad call you Killer and picks it up. He uses it in the story, and a couple of months later, a magazine comes around and everybody in the company reads about it and thinks it's very funny. Which it is… I guess."

He jammed the fresh power pack into the butt of the laser pistol and looked out the window again. He said, "So from then on you can't ditch the name. You get a little teed off a couple of times and go a round with a couple of them, but it doesn't do any good. The whole company calls you that."

"I see," she said.

"Come on, it's clear," he said. "Move fast and get into the back of the car. I don't think there's any more of them around."

They left the house; Jim grinned at her and said, "Boy Scouts to the rescue."

Her face was wan. She said, "How many of them are dead back there?"

Bert didn't answer He said to Jim, "Sit in the back with her and keep a lookout to the rear."

"Right."

In the car, Kenneth Kneedler was sitting where they had left him in the front seat. He was staring straight ahead, but his eyes were unseeing, glazed. He was, Bert decided, probably regretting breaking so easily.

He started up and began retracing their route.

Jill said, her voice empty. "But how does one go about deserving a name like that? How does one become the most decorated man of a war?"

Jim looked at her askance from the side of his eyes, but then out the back window again, looking for pursuit.

Bert Alshuler said, after taking a deep breath, “By accident. Usually, while doing everything you can to keep olive. Usually, while you’re scared stiff inside. Sergeant Alvin York in the First World War and Audie Murphy in the Second didn’t have decorations in mind when they did their thing. Neither did I in the Asian War.”

He took another deep breath before going on “After that TV thing, they field commissioned me. I was just a lad but the brass likes that kind of publicity. It goes over very well back home; good for civilian morale. At any rate, a few months later somebody pulled a razzle and the company was sent in against a gook outfit that was supposed to be company strength too, but wasn’t. It was a battalion. And we were pinned down on top of a ridge and stayed pinned down for six days. They couldn’t get in to relieve us because the monsoon rains were on. So when the helio-jets finally managed to come in and run the gooks off, I was alone on top of the hill.”

“Alone?” she said weakly.

“Alone. With all my lieutenants and sergeants and corporals and privates, and even a chaplain and two news reporters, scattered around, all up and down that ridge. The machine gun ammunition was all gone, and all the grenades and all the mortar shells and the food and the water. We’d been holding them off with small arms fire for the past twenty-four hours. And my last man died only fifteen minutes before the relief came.”

“So when they finally came in, complete as usual with the TV crews, you stand up, all alone, and tuck your automatic under your arm, like you were going out after rabbits or quail, and you start down the hill, still on your feet, though you’ve taken several hits. And there they are, at the foot of the ridge, taking in all the bodies, both of the company and the gooks, that are spread so thick you can hardly walk without stepping on one. So on your way down you fish a stogie cigar from your shirt pocket and stick it in your mouth and you’re awfully tired, but you’re still on your feet. And when you come up on the TV camera crew, in their natty, ironed-that-morning outfits, the newsman on the mike says, ‘It’s Killer Caine. The sole survivor is Captain Killer Caine.’ And you walk up to him real close and look into his face and say, ‘Got a match, friend?’ ”

Bert Alshuler took a deep breath. “Possibly you saw that bit of asinine bravado on the TV screen at the time. I understand it was rather universally shown. I don’t even remember it happening. I don’t remember anything of those last couple of days. I was probably in semi-shock.”

Jill shook her head. “I never watched the war propaganda. I was

a pacifist."

"So was I," Bert said wearily. "Back when they grabbed me and stuck me in. They didn't accept whatever plea I made and I was inducted."

Jim Hawkins chuckled at that.

Bert looked over his shoulder at him. "What's so funny, you grinning hyena? You probably volunteered."

Jim chortled. "You, a pacifist."

Bert wound it up to Jill. "So in a week or so, when they decided to create the Elite Service, they bounced me up to major and I was in command. And Jim, here, my second. That's where most of the notoriety came in, when the Elite Service was exposed a few times in some of the anti-war left wing newspapers and magazines."

Jill looked at Jim Hawkins, next to her. "Why didn't *you* bother to change you name and undergo plastic surgery?"

Jim grinned in put-on modesty. "Who ever hears of the third most highly decorated man to come out of a war? Or the second, for that matter. Who took the second Bert?"

"Darned if I know. I didn't even know you were third."

"My old buddy," Jim said.

They had come to the dispatcher at the entry to the underground of the university city. Bert brought the electro-steamer to a halt, threw it off manual and said into the screen, "Administration Building."

The auto-drive took over and they eased forward and into the traffic.

For the first time since they had left the house in which Jill had been held, Kenneth Kneedler spoke up. He said, "Where are you taking me? I demand to be released."

Jim chuckled. He seemed to be in a chuckling mood, Bert thought sourly. They had about as much reason to be amused as they did to take Holy Orders.

Jim said, his voice friendly, "We're going some place where we can bounce you around a little more, Golden Boy There's a lot of talking that has to be done."

"I won't stand for this," Kneedler blurted. "In the data banks is the information that on your Identity Card this vehicle was rented and went from the building in which you reside to that house in the off-skirts. I don't know what went on there, but I am convinced that criminal action took place. You will be apprehended."

"Three bits of criminal action took place," Bert put in flatly. "There are three dead men in that house."

Jill flinched.

But Jim said cheerfully, "And that's why we're going to have to find out what's going on, Golden Boy."

"You'll get nothing more from me!"

Jim said, wonderingly, "What is it about being a professor that doesn't require brains? You didn't seem to bother to listen to Bert telling how you acquire a handle like Killer Caine. Four men are dead in the fun and games we've been having these past few hours, Professor. Do you think one more makes any difference to us? We've got to get out from under, whatever way we can. You're a witness, right? Maybe it'll turn out we can't afford a witness. You never know."

The assistant professor seemed to shrink down into his clothes and some of his newly regained courage disappeared.

Jill said, "I can't allow this."

Bert said, "Take it easy, Jill. We've got to find out what's going on."

"Miss Masterson," she said.

Bert looked at her emptily. "I went into that place to rescue you, Miss Masterson, not to have the fun of exposing myself to three trigger-happy lads. In my time I've run into men who get their jollies out of killing. Most of them passed from the scene fairly quickly. I am still alive."

"I am sure that all your motivations are not altruistic, Killer Cain."

He was bitter. "I can't even figure out what my motivations are," he said. "I haven't got the vaguest idea of what's going on. I haven't the vaguest idea of why those men grabbed you."

"Through my own silliness."

Jim said, "Here we are," as they emerged into the metro beneath the Administration Building.

When they had stopped, Bert said flatly, "We're going up to my suite to have a talk. As Jim pointed out, he and I are in the soup, and not through our own desire. The only way we can get out, if we can, is through cooperation with you two. Neither of us are particularly noble, we wouldn't be alive today if we were. So we go up to my suite and talk a bit. If you object, Professor Kneedler?"

"I'll go with you. I realize that you men are desperadoes."

"Now, that's a nice turn of phrase," Jim said.

Jill glared at him. "I hate you," she said, dripping cold contempt.

Jim said, trying to be light, but an apology there, "And I love you, Sweetie Pie."

She snorted.

Bert led the way from the car to the exclusive elevator that led to the uppermost reaches of the Administration Building.

At Suite G he turned to Jill. "You must be very upset. Do you want to go to your own apartment and, well, clean up and rest, or whatever?"

She looked at him coolly. “I refuse to leave you here with this unfortunate man.” She looked at Kneedler. “You are Professor…?”

“Kneedler,” the teacher said. He was in a state of exhaustion.

“Kay,” Bert said. “Let’s all go in and find out what’s going on.”

In the living room, Jill looked at Jim, dwelling on the arm he had in a black sling. His face was on the pale side.

She said, “You’ve been hurt.”

Jim said, mockingly, “Didn’t you notice? While your boy friends were taking you for a ride, Bert and I tried to, uh, admonish them. One of them hit me a little with that shooter he had.”

“Let me take a look at it,” she said.

“All right, there’s a medical kit in here.” He looked at Bert apologetically. “I seem to have ripped some of those bandages off, there at the house. I’m dripping a little more ink.”

“Need a medic?”

“Maybe not. Let’s see.”

On the way to the bathroom with Jill, Jim stopped at the bar long enough to pour himself some more of the ancient Scotch. Carrying his glass with him, as he followed her, he said, “This stuff almost makes the whole thing worth while, though frankly I came to this place to loaf on my veteran’s benefits and Guaranteed Annual Income, not for this sort of fun and games.”

Kenneth Kneedler sank onto one of the living room couches and held his head in his hands.

Bert Alshuler went over to the ornate desk and sat before the phone screen. He flicked the switch and said, “Professor Ralph Marsh. Albert Alshuler calling, I’m listed on his restricted phone.”

Marsh’s plump face faded in. When he saw who it was, irritation was there. He snapped, “What is it now, confound it?”

Bert said, “We’ve rescued Jill Masterson, confound it.”

That stopped the other. Finally, he got out, “You have? How?”

“It’s a long story and one I haven’t got time to tell right now. The thing is, the three men who were holding her were armed.”

The professor stared at him.

Bert said, flatly, “They’re dead. It’s undoubtedly on the data bank records in the traffic department that I drove out to that house in a rented vehicle. Here are the coordinates. The place is on the outskirts.” He stated the coordinates Kneedler had given him. “There’s something else that could be tracked down through the data banks. We had to kidnap Assistant Professor Kenneth Kneedler. He was in on it. He knew where they were. We had to track him down and that record will be somewhere too.”

The professor was aghast.

Bert rapped, “Can you do anything about all this?”

"I… I'm not sure."

"Well, you'd better hop to it. And listen, Marsh, I want to see Katz, absolutely soonest. Understand?"

"He's out of town."

"Well, get him back into town, damn it." He slammed off the phone.

Bert Alshuler looked over at Kneedler who was still sitting, head in hands. Bert went over to the bar, poured a double slug in a glass and carried it to the teacher.

"Here," he said.

Kneedler looked up. "I don't drink."

"This comes under the head of medicine. You need it. Toss it all the way down."

The other obeyed and sputtered.

Jill and Jim came back into the room, and Jim made a beeline for the bar.

Bert growled at him, "Stay away from that liquor, you lush. We've got to keep our heads clear."

Jim ignored him, got a drink and then came over and sat on the far end of the couch Kneedler occupied. Jill took a chair and tightened her lips.

Bert said, "Kay. Let's start Jill, why did those men take you out of here?"

They said they had come to warn *me*. To tell me all about Katz and what he was up to. I wouldn't listen and they were afraid that some of their enemies would show up. So they forced me to go along to some place where they'd have time to explain. I was stubborn.

"Why did they shoot at Jim and me out in the hall?"

"The others said later that the one with the gun evidently thought you were connected with Katz, and that he had just been trying to scare you off."

Jim chuckled sourly. "Unfortunately, we don't scare so good."

"Shut up, Jim," Bert said. "Well, what did they tell you, there at the house before Jim and I arrived?"

"Practically nothing. I was terribly upset at seeing the shooting and all. They were letting me rest, so that I'd be settled down and could understand."

Bert Alshuler grimaced and turned to Kenneth Kneedler. "Kay. It's your turn. Start at the beginning, friend. Four men are dead, and we've got to find some good reasons why."

Chapter Eleven

Evidently, the raw spirits had done Kneedler some good. His face was defiant again. He said, “How much do you know about brain stimulation, the augmentation of concentration and the increasing of mind capacity?”

“Precious little except personal experience the last couple of days. Start at the beginning, Kneedler,” Bert said.

Kneedler breathed deeply. “Very well. If there is ever a beginning, possibly the beginnings were back a few decades ago when the biological explosion really started.”

“Come again on that one,” Jim said.

Kneedler looked over at him. “The science writer, Gordon Taylor, called it the *Biological Time Bomb*, and it was. A dozen breakthroughs were made over a very short period. Have you heard of *Cylert*, developed by the Abbott Laboratories in Chicago? No? It was the trade name of magnesium pemoline. They tested it on amnesia patients and others suffering from senility. Memory was fantastically improved. But that was just the beginning and just one line of experimentation. Another line was with THC, the laboratory equivalent of *cannabis sativa*.”

“Pot,” Jim said.

“Yes, marijuana. But that was just one of the hallucinogens they worked with. Mescaline was another, and LSD, too. You’re probably not up on the subject, but the earliest advocates of the hallucinogens, as a means of expanding perception, such as Aldous Huxley, had a germ of reality in some of their crackpot beliefs. Obviously, it is, and always has been, possible to speed up your perception, brighten your wits, through the use of chemicals. Caffeine comes to mind, and nicotine, for that matter.”

He thought back for a moment, before going on. “There were other lines of investigation into the possibilities of increasing I.Q. At first they worked considerably with babies and children. Holger Hyden, a Swedish professor, was a pioneer. Influencing the child before it was ever born, he came up with one, Karl Ortel, who was answering the phone at the age of thirteen months and was speaking four languages at the age of three. Hyden’s super-children had an average vocabulary of two hundred words by eighteen months, as compared to six words for ordinary children. This meant their I.Q.s would be over the 140 level of genius and perhaps as high as 250. By the way, up until that time the highest I.Q. ever recorded was 205, attained by a California girl.”

“Kay,” Bert said impatiently. “As far back as several decades ago,

they began making breakthroughs in bettering memory, increasing speed of perception and goosing along I.Q. So then…?"

"So then the curtain dropped."

Jill, Jim and Bert all stared at him.

Kneedler said impatiently, "Can't you see some of the implications?" He came to his feet and went over to the desk. He sat down before the library booster, activated and spoke into it.

He said, "This, for instance, was written some time ago by a Gerald Feinberg in his *The Prometheus Project*: 'Suppose it were decided that children to be born in the future should be biologically modified so that their mental powers were greatly increased in such respects as much better memories, faster thought processes, ability to concentrate on a number of problems simultaneously, or any of the other mental abilities that men have wished for. It is likely that the intelligent children, once grown to maturity, would be somewhat impatient with a society designed for their more dull-witted ancestors and would set about changing it to fit their own needs… Such a confrontation between man and superman may be an extreme example of the consequences of biological engineering.' "

He called for another book and shortly began to read again.

"This comes from Professor Donald MacKay, of Keele University, in an article in *Science Digest* : The possibilities of misapplication of the results of brain science are already frightening to many people. Could it be, they ask, that here at last we face the ultimate Pandora's Box, a secret whose uncovering would be the destruction of human society? Has brain research gone far enough, if not too far, already?' "

He returned to the couch, obviously gaining courage by the minute. He sat down again and looked at his audience defiantly. "Can't you see? It is pure dynamite. Can you realize the changes that would take place in our society? Would we put up with the inept who now run the country? Who now run the economy? Would we put up with such anachronisms as the military, and a world divided into conflicting national states?"

Bert said suddenly, "If you're a political economist, how come you're so far up on this biological engineering subject?"

Kneedler all but glared at him. "Can't you comprehend the ramifications so far as socio-economics are concerned? You grabbed onto the fact that I taught communism in one of my classes. How long do you think the government of the Soviet Complex would last if the average citizen had an I.Q. of 200?"

Jim grinned. "How long would our own government?"

The other turned to him and nodded. "Or any other in the world."

Jill said, "But you and the others of your group. Where do you come in? What do you stand for?"

"An all-out investigation into all ramifications. This must be taken out from under wraps and released to all. We're at the crossroads. It's one of the most important crises that has ever touched the race and the details are in the hands of self-seeking bunglers."

He got up from his seat again, went back to the library booster, and went through the routine of finding another quotation he wanted.

"Listen to this: 'The ethical problems raised by genetics and neurophysiology, and by the social and mental sciences are at least as great as those arising from atomic energy and the H-Bomb, from space travel and ultrasonic flight, from telecommunications, computers and automation. There is no doubt in my mind that several of these developments are as epoch-making for mankind as any that have preceded them. They rank at least as high, if not higher, in importance than the discovery of the wheel.' " Kneedler looked at them. "That quotation comes from the British ethologist Dr. W. H. Thorpe of Cambridge University, one of the greatest authorities of his time on the subject."

Bert said, "But what's all this cloak and dagger stuff? This kidnapping of Jill? This going around armed, in a day when guns are taboo for the public? This hiding of the identity of your gang, and the rest of it?"

Kneedler looked at him indignantly. "Katz and his crew are out to get us. We're the opposition. They've got to try to eliminate us."

"But why?" Jill said, frowning. "What in the name of heavens is it that Katz wants?"

"He wants the knowledge for himself—and his group. And not for anyone else. They're afraid to let it into the hands of anyone else. They've kept the developments suppressed for decades but you can't keep human discoveries hidden indefinitely. And every year that goes by, still new discoveries are made. And always there is the lurking fear: suppose the Soviets or someone else hit upon the same information and released it to their people. What happens if, suddenly, their population or that of China begins averaging more than 200 in the way of I.Q. and also begins utilizing our new educational techniques so that in a matter of months they have educations that usually take twenty years to acquire?"

Bert shook his head in confusion. "The more I hear about all this, the more of a razzle it seems."

"That makes two of us," Jim said.

Bert came to a decision. "Look," he said, "you get along. We know where we can get in touch with you. Tomorrow I'll see Katz and check this out."

Jim gestured at the assistant professor with his head. "Suppose he goes to Security?"

Bert looked at him. “He can’t. He’s in on it. He was up on the fact that Jill was going to be kidnapped. He’s involved. Not as badly as we are, but involved.”

Kneedler had returned to his seat, but now he stood. He said, “All right. There’s a good deal more to it, but it can wait until you’ve satisfied yourselves that Katz is an opportunist and one of the most dangerous men in the country.”

“Well see,” Bert told him. He led the other to the door and ushered him out.

When he returned to the living room, he was thoughtful. Jim Hawkins and Jill Masterson looked up at him. For a moment he paced the floor, fists jammed into jacket pockets.

He turned on them and demanded, “How did you two meet?”

Jim said, “Why, at a faculty party.” He leered at Jill. “It was love at first sight, eh, Sweetie Pie?”

She snorted.

“What were you doing at a faculty party?” Bert said.

His old sidekick was aggrieved. “Holy smokes, I don’t know. I figured I was a minor celebrity because of the war record. After all, I got a Medal of Honor too.”

Bert looked at Jill. “And you?”

She said, “Professor Katz invited me. We had already discussed the project and I was still deciding whether or not I wanted to take him up on it. Why?”

“It’s too much of a coincidence, you and me meeting so easily. Three hundred thousand persons in this university city and the only two students on Katz’ project meet in the first days of the semester. We were meant to meet, but they wanted to disguise the fact. You were introduced to my old buddy, who in turn introduced you to me. All, seemingly, coincidence.”

“But why?” she demanded.

“I don’t know,” he said. He looked out the window. It was dark, “I suppose we had better break it up until morning. If anything develops during the night, call me on your phone.”

“Or, better still, me,” Jim said. “I’m staying here.”

Bert looked at him.

Jim said, “We’re all in this together now. I’m staying near my old buddy, old buddy. Just like old times. A team. Seems to me you could use a man to cover your back.”

Bert came to a quick decision. “Kay,” he said. “Now let’s take a look at where our suites join. It occurs to me that they’ve already used one musher in this game. If they ring in another, you might not be able to call us.”

Jill said, indecision in her voice, ” *I*… I don’t know if I want to

stay here at all. I don't know if I want to associate with… with you two. I don't like any of this." She licked her lower lip nervously.

All right. She was only a kid. She'd never seen anyone shot before. She'd never come in contact with old pros like Bert and Jim. She'd never been exposed to extreme violence before. She was scared, and why not?

Bert said, "Jill, there are too many angles we don't know about Too many people running around waving guns, and sometimes shooting them. The issues are evidently big, probably bigger than we realize at this stage of the game. I strongly suggest that you stay right next door, with Jim and me on hand, until we've been dealt more cards. You don't have to like us. As you've made clear, we're not particularly likable people. However, at least you can trust us. Among other things, lover boy, here, is in love with you."

Without waiting for an answer he led the way into one of the bedrooms of his suite. "This must adjoin your place," he said to Jill.

"I suppose so," she said grudgingly.

Jim said, "Look, here's a door. Evidently they can turn both suites into one if the V.I.P. is big enough." He bent over the keyhole and then straightened, surprise on his face. "Devil! It's open." He swung the door free, and, sure enough, Jill's apartment was on the other side.

Bert Alshuler looked at him indignantly. "Any door is open when you're around," he growled.

Chapter Twelve

After they had seen Jill safely to her quarters and checked the place out to be sure nobody was there, Bert Alshuler and Jim Hawkins returned to Suite G. Bert led the way into the dining room.

They sat at the table and Jim took in the menu on the screen. “Holy smokes,” he said in admiration. “The works.” He ordered enough exotic food for three persons and a bottle of vintage champagne.

“That’s all we need,” Bert growled. “To get smashed.” He ordered more moderately himself, conveniently forgetting his steak gorging of yesterday.

Jim ignored him. He said, “Old buddy, how’d you ever fall into this pool of crud and come out spittin’ pearls? Didn’t you have enough of being in the middle of messes in the war?”

“It turned out I was the smartest man in the army, so I was nominated.”

“Smartest man in the army, eh? Never noticed,” Jim said, working the cork out of the bottle of chilled wine. “You sure managed to hide the fact, old buddy. Remember that time in Brisbane those sharpies took away our whole taw with those crooked dice?”

“Shut up,” Bert said. “I’ve got to think.”

“And I’ve got to eat,” Jim said. “As an old hand doughboy, I’m smart enough to grub up on first rate chow when it’s available. Tomorrow well probably be back to hot dogs and beans.”

“Doughboy?”

Jim said cheerfully, “You’re sure not up on current slang, old buddy. The public called us doughboys in the First war, G.I.s in the Second and slobs in the Asian War. By that time they were getting tired of wars and heroes.”

“Shut up,” Bert muttered again.

They spent the night in the bedroom that adjoined Jill Masterson’s suite, their laser pistols on the tables that flanked their twin beds.

Like the old army men that they were, they awoke at dawn and decided not to bother the girl, who undoubtedly was more than ordinarily exhausted and could use the sleep. They had a glum breakfast, this time in the kitchen, Jim again ordering more expensive dishes than he could have possibly eaten. He had been about to order another bottle of champagne, but Bert sent him a sour look and he desisted.

After the meal, Bert led him into the study. Jim looked about and gave a low hiss of a whistle in appreciation of the elaborate layout.

Bert indicated the auto-teacher. “That’s what the whole razzle is about.”

“Looks like an ordinary auto-teacher to me. I took some courses in the army on them. They allow you to go as fast, or as slow as you want. Eliminates sitting around in classes with others who are either too smart or too stupid to go at the same rate you do.”

“Kay. But this is an auto-teacher with a difference. Sit down and watch. Get yourself something to read. You can read? You *were a* captain?”

“What’s that got to do with being able to read?” Jim said, aggrieved.

Bert went over to his pills and took one of the brown ones and headed back to his seat before the auto-teacher’s screen. He looked down at his watch. As expected, the second hand was crawling. He thought of something and got up again and crossed to where Jim had taken a comfort chair.

“Let’s see what time you’ve got?” he said, taking up the other’s wrist. Once again, as he had suspected, Jim’s second hand was also plodding along at a pace no faster than his own. He grunted satisfaction and returned to his chair.

“Holy… smokes… stop… dashing… around… and… stop… talking… so… fast… I… can hardly… understand… you,” Jim said, drawling it out so slowly as to be irritating.

Bert flicked on the screen and the robot voice said, “Elementary Physics, One and Two.” He pressed the page switch and took up his marking stylus. He sped things up as the brown pill took full effect, and then again, and again.

He didn’t notice his companion coming up behind him, standing there looking over his shoulder, until the other’s voice came dragging out.

“What… the… devil’s… going… on?”

“I’m studying physics. Sit down and I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Studying?… You… completely… around… the… bend?… You… couldn’t… even… turn… pages… that… fast… by… hand.”

“Sit down,” Bert ordered.

The other returned to his chair, walking very slowly, looking as though he were trudging his way through molasses.

Bert finished the book and went over to his pills and took one of the green ones. The reaction seemed to be all but instantaneous.

Jim was gaping at him. “Will you quit running around like that? You’re making me dizzy.”

Bert settled himself across from Jim. “I just finished a course in Elementary Physics, One and Two.”

Jim was blank. “One and Two? You mean a whole year?”

"Yes."

"Aw, come off it, Killer. I took physics last year and just managed to squeeze through. It's all great with these kids, but old duffers like us have got out of the studying habit."

"Kay. So you've taken the same course, eh? Ask me some questions."

"Okay, smarty pants. Describe the third law of thermodynamics."

"It states that every substance has a definite entropy, that is availability of energy to do work, that approaches zero as its temperature approaches absolute zero. As the energy becomes unavailable the entropy is said to increase. You want me to go further into it? I can quote you by the page from V. N. Faires, A. L. King, Doolittle or Zerbon."

"Don't bother," Jim muttered. "Describe the principle of operation of a photoelectric cell."

Bert did.

Jim was staring in absolute disbelief. "And you expect me to believe you got all that in less than a couple of hours?"

"You know this is my freshman year. Where would I have picked up college level physics?"

Jim was silent for several minutes, his face still registering his disbelief. Finally, he said, "What was all that running around like a whirling dervish, and talking like a speeded up old-time tape recorder?"

Bert stood and went over to the table that bore his pill bottles. He held them up. "As Professor Marsh put it, the brown ones turn you on, the green ones turn you off."

Jim took the brown bottle and shook out one of the pills and stared at it. "You mean, all I have to do is chomp one of these and I speed up to the point where I can take on a year's course in a couple of hours? Devil! I'll give it a try."

"Oh, no you don't," Bert said hurriedly. "That's not the whole treatment. I've been taking a series of shots, too. This stuff isn't to be messed around with. I made the mistake of taking a drink while I was high on one of these brown bombers and it knocked me for a razzle that lasted until morning. I don't know what might happen to you if you took it without the preliminary shots."

Bert returned the pill to the bottle and screwed the lid back on.

Jim was frustrated. "Holy smokes, and Jill's in on this same deal? In a week, she'll be so smart I won't be able to talk to her."

"Evidently she is," Bert said, looking at his watch. "Let's give old Marsh a try."

He went over to the phone screen and tried to get the professor, without result. The other had evidently put a really tight priority

rating on his phone.

Bert Alshuler leaned back to think, but then his own phone screen hummed. He activated it. The face of Leonard Katz was there and his rueful smile on it.

Bert snapped, "What's so funny?"

Katz said, "I've just heard from Ralph Marsh. You must think that we've taken inadequate provisions for… your project."

"That's one way of putting it," Bert said sarcastically. "Kay, Professor. Let's get together. There are a few things to be discussed. But first, are you in a position to take care of… that situation that developed yesterday?"

"Yes. Steps are being taken. We are not without resources. I want you to meet me here at the Octagon."

"Where?"

"The Octagon, in Great Washington. Come immediately. Report to the offices of General Russell Paul."

"No you don't," Bert Alshuler said flatly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I don't like the way things are going. I want to know more of the rules of this game before I play any more."

"My dear Alshuler, I don't know what you mean."

"I can't make it much clearer, I'm afraid."

The professor said coldly, "According to your dossier and Ability Quotient, you don't become afraid, Alshuler, or should I say Major Caine?"

"You should say Alshuler, and if my Ability Quotient says I don't get afraid, then those tests of yours aren't as accurate as you think they are. I get very afraid, and that's one of the reasons I'm still alive, Katz. I'm not coming to the Octagon. I have a sneaking suspicion that you'd have too much muscle there—on the off-chance that I don't like what you have to say and want to bow out. If I want to bow out, I want to bow out, not be finished off. Oh, you'd be surprised how afraid I can get."

The other was miffed and showed it.

Bert waited it out. Jim Hawkins began to move in to look over his shoulder into the screen, but Bert waved him away. Jim Hawkins was one of the few cards he had up his sleeve and he wanted him to remain there for at least the time.

Katz said finally, "Very well. The general and I will take the next vacuum-tube to Mid-West University City. We'll see you shortly." His face faded.

Bert turned back to Jim, scowling irritation.

"General who?" Jim said. "Is it late enough in the day to decently have a drink? Or indecently, for that matter."

"No," Bert said. "Damn it, Jim, stay off the liquor until we find out what's going on and whose side we're on. General Paul You remember old "Bugs" Paul. The Octagon yet! I'm beginning to have glimmerings, not to speak of suspicions."

Jim said, with mock sadness, "I'd just hate to have somebody hit me the final one while all that good hooch is still in there unconsumed."

"Hooch?"

"Lush, booze, the sauce."

"Oh, shut up, you rummy."

"Now you're getting with it. Rummy. I haven't heard that one for a coon's age." In high irritation, Bert went on into the kitchen and acquired a triple decker sandwich. As always after a bout with the brown-pills-turn-you-on-the-green-pills-turn-you-off routine, he was desperately hungry. He had ironed out one thing, with Jim acting as his stooge. Evidently, whatever Marsh had him on speeded up your metabolism fantastically. That was what was burning up the energy. It didn't make much difference, under this set-up, but he would have thought they'd give him a shot of glucose or something. Was it glucose they gave you for quick energy?

Still eating the sandwich, he went on back into the living room.

The lanky Jim, sprawled all over a couch, said, "Old buddy, ore you thinking this out?" He waved, all-embracingly, at the apartment. "Here it is, raining beer—holy smokes, champagne—and you're in a tizzy. What's wrong with this deal? How can I suck up to it?"

Bert glowered at him. "Would you get into a war without even knowing what side you were on?"

Jim leered. "That's a good question. First, I'd find out what side was going to win."

"Yeah. Well, I'm still at the stage where I'm not really sure what they're fighting about. Come on, let's see if Jill is up and around."

"Why not just phone her?"

"Because I don't know who might be monitoring every call that goes on, in, and around these apartments. The less we use public communications the less business of ours whoever listening in will know."

"Holy smokes, you're really running scared," Jim protested, unwinding himself from his seat. He followed Bert into the bedroom adjoining Jill's suite.

Bert knocked on the door and got no response; knocked again more loudly with the same result, then opened it and called, "Jill?"

A voice from the living room answered, "Come on in."

She was in a comfort chair, coffee cup in hand, and looking wan. "I barricaded the door last night, on the off-chance that one of you

two Romeos would try sneaking in."

"You're dated," Jim told her. "Not Romeos. Sheiks. The men are Sheiks and the girls are Shebas."

"We wrestled it out," Bert told her, "to see who'd make the attempt but it was a draw, so we went to bed."

"My heroes," she sighed.

Bert then told her about his talk with Katz.

"The Octagon?" she said. "What in the name of heavens do we have to do with the Octagon?"

"Evidently, Katz has some general over there he's in contact with. They're both coming to give us their story."

She shook her head. "No, I'm scared, Bert. I'm a terrible coward I'll… I'll stay right here."

Jim shook his head and said cheerfully, "Everybody's getting scared these days."

Bert looked at him. "So would you be if you had the brains."

Jim grunted. "That's right. You two are the big brains, aren't you? That's why you've been selected for this gravy train."

Jill said to him, "Oh, stop being silly. How's your arm?"

He looked down at it, still in the black sling. "Much better. I wish we'd had some of these new super-drugs back during the war. They've gotten to the point where you're all healed up before you've hardly been hit."

Bert said to her, "Kay. We'll meet with our friends and report back to you. You ought to be safe here for a few hours. Be sure you recognize anybody on the door screen before you let them in."

Chapter Thirteen

Bert Alshuler and Jim Hawkins returned to the other suite just in time to hear the ping of the front door. Bert went to it to find the face of Professor Marsh on the identity screen. He opened up.

Bert led the way back to the living room.

Jim looked up from where he was sprawled full length on a couch. “Hi, Doc.”

Marsh said; “Confound it, are you still here?”

Bert said, “I’m not sure I’m going to take any more of your treatment until I learn what’s going on.”

The professor was testy. “Then don’t take any more of those stimulants I gave you. I’d suggest you continue. I am not quite sure what would result if the series was discontinued at this point. I am not even certain that we could pick it up again, after an interim of even a few days.”

“Hell, I’m in it this far,” Bert said in disgust. “Let’s go.”

The doctor-professor opened his briefcase and began to bring forth the now familiar hypodermics and injections.

Jim, watching interestedly, said, “Hey Doc, how about letting me in on this? I’ve always wanted to read *War and Peace*.”

Marsh ignored him but looked at Bert in irritation. “You’ve been talking too much.” He readied one of the hypos.

“Kay. But you haven’t been talking enough,” Bert said. “This party is getting rough and I don’t mind having a little insurance. Jim’s been an insurance policy of mine for a long time.”

“Old buddy, old buddy,” Jim drawled, “you make our fine, noble friendship sound so mercenary.”

Bert got three shots this time.

Marsh said, “Miss Masterson is in the adjoining suite?”

“That’s right,” Bert said. “What do you want with her?”

“That is none of your affair.” The other began to repack his briefcase.

Jim sighed and brought himself erect. “You might as well go through this way. We’ve opened a connecting door with Jill’s apartment.” He led the professor out of the room, and a moment later Bert heard him calling her name and knocking on her bedroom door.

The phone hummed and he went over. Katz’ face was there, evidently he was calling on his pocket phone. He said, “We’ll meet you in the penthouse of the Acropolis Building in about twenty minutes.”

Bert said, “Who else is going to be there?”

“No one except General Paul. I understand you have had dealings

with him before."

"Remotely," Bert said. "Majors don't exactly have dealings with three star generals. Kay, I'll be there."

The other faded off.

Jim returned from the other suite and said, "What's cooking?"

Bert said, "Let's go. That was Katz. We're to meet him in the penthouse of the Acropolis Building. Know where that is?"

"Sure. It's one of the swankiest high-rises in this university city. Do we take our shooters?"

"From now on, old buddy," Bert said, a grim quality in his voice, "we take our shooters wherever we go. Listen are you sure you want to be in on this? What's there in it for you, Jim—besides the possibility of being hit again?" He led the way to the bedroom where they had left their laser pistols.

Jim followed him, saying, "Old buddy, I smell money. Piles on piles of pseudo-dollars. Everything about this deal reeks with it. And I've got an old belief that if you rub against enough people who are well-breaded, some of the crumbs might rub off on you."

"Ha," Bert snorted "And I thought it was affection for your old buddy, old buddy."

"Ha," Jim said, taking up his gun and checking the charge. He tucked the weapon back into his belt again.

Bert slipped his into the shoulder harness he was still wearing and said, "Let's go."

They remained silent as they sank down into the depths of the Administration Building to the metro station where they took a two-seater, automated vehicle, to the Acropolis Building. The metro there was even more ornate than that of the high-rise where Bert had his quarters. Evidently, the building was very recent.

At the elevator banks, Bert approached an information screen and said, "I wish to go to the penthouse."

"Name and identity number, please."

Bert gave them.

"Yes, Mr. Alshuler. You are expected. Please take Elevator Z."

Elevator Z turned out to be the equivalent of the restricted elevator that Bert Alshuler utilized in his own building.

As they rose to the top floor, Jim looked around the small compartment in wonder. "They've done everything but plate it with gold," he said. "Our race is becoming effete, old buddy. But, as I say, I hope some of it rubs off on me."

Bert said, "How quick are you with that shooter, left-handed?"

The gun was magically in his companion's hand. And just as magically back in the belt, beneath the jacket again.

Jim leered at him. "I always was a quicker draw than you, old

buddy. Even left-handed. You think we might be using these?"

"I don't know what to think."

The elevator finally came to a halt and the door opened. They emerged onto a scene that was hard to believe could be at the top of a skyscraping building. Fully three quarters of the area was gardens, trees, lawns and pools. There was even a small running stream, issuing from a small hill, rambling through the park and then flowing back into another hillock. There were two rustic wooden bridges over it. The whole had been so designed, so landscaped that there was no feeling of being on a building high in the air.

"Holy smokes," Jim said, in awe.

"Beyond dreams of avarice," Bert muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing."

A military figure, though dressed in mufti, approached them. The man was in the later middle years, face expressionless, eyes quizzical and narrow as though in perpetual squint. The body was firm and its health aggressive, an obvious product of the sunlamp, the careful watching of dieting and drinks, the gym and masseur.

The newcomer put out a long, hard hand. "Major Caine, Captain Hawkins."

Jim shook first. "Yes, sir. It's been quite a while."

"That is correct. You were on my staff briefly there in Bangkok, weren't you, Captain?" He turned to Bert.

Bert shook his hand, and said, "Not major, mister. And my name is now Albert Alshuler."

The other looked at him quizzically. "I seem to remember tendering you a decoration once, ah, Alshuler. In those days you were referred to as Killer Caine."

"And you were General Bugs Paul. But that was in those days, not now."

The flush that came barely made it through the tan. The general said, abruptly, "The professor is awaiting us in his study." He turned and started off, adding over his shoulder, "I came to welcome you since the staff has been dismissed. We wished the utmost of privacy."

Bert and Jim fell in.

Bert said conversationally, "Ain't this quite a layout for a university professor?"

The general said, "Leonard Katz has private means."

"I'll bet he has."

The study let off the garden and they entered it through French windows. It was obviously a scholar's retreat, no attempt being made to live up to the ostentation of the rest of the establishment. The room was lined with books, largely old and battered, in a day when books

have given way to the library boosters connected with the National Data Banks. There was a wide range of paintings on the walls and Bert, no great authority, decided that they were undoubtedly originals. He recognized at least two, a Picasso and a Degas. He had never seen an original of either before, outside a museum. There was a fireplace that evidently was actually utilized, either that or the logs stacked to one side were a clever bit of business. There was a bar in one corner, and there were old style rifles and shotguns in a rack and several heads of game displayed, including a huge American buffalo.

Professor Leonard Katz was seated, a book in hand, in a battered red easy chair of the old type seldom seen in these days. He came to his feet when they entered, put the book on a cocktail table and came forward to meet them.

He nodded to Bert Alshuler, shook hands and then turned to Jim Hawkins, his eyebrows high.

The general said, “This is former Captain James Hawkins, once of my staff before the forming of the Elite Service in which he was Major Caine’s second in command.”

“Hawkins, Professor Leonard Katz.”

“Alshuler,” Bert said, “not Caine.”

Leonard Katz said, “I see.” He shook with Jim Hawkins. “And why did you come to this meeting, my dear Hawkins?”

Jim wasn’t the type to be easily thrown off. He grinned and said, “When trouble started brewing up for Bert, it seemed just natural for me to come along for the trip.” His voice altered just slightly. “I’m riding shotgun.”

“Very well,” Katz said. “Sit down, gentlemen. Is it too early in the day to offer you a drink? General, will you do the honors?”

Jim was the only customer. He winked at Bert. It wasn’t every day you had a three star general rushing the drinks for you.

When they were all seated, the professor leaned forward, put his fingertips together and looked at Bert. “*I* understand that you have been having some second thoughts about our… project.”

Bert crossed his legs, relaxed and said, “It was pointed out to me yesterday that the story of my ranking highest in Ability Quotient was a bit hard to swallow. My fellow nominee for the project indicated my reputation suggested that my true abilities lay in a different field.”

“Very well, and to what conclusion did this bring you, my dear Alshuler?”

“That The Establishment, as they used to call it, has something up its sleeve and that I’ve been elected one of the patsies…” He turned his eyes to Jim Hawkins. “Isn’t patsy one of the old terms, Jim?”

Jim jiggled his glass and said approvingly, “You’re getting on, Killer. Patsy is good.”

Bert turned back to the professor and general. “Elected one of the patsies to pull some of the chestnuts out of the fire. They must be some rather hot chestnuts, considering my reputation—which I’ve been trying to get away from since demobilization.”

The general was irritated. He said abruptly, “See here, Caine, have you ever wondered why The Establishment, so called, became The Establishment?”

Bert looked at him politely, and waited.

“It became The Establishment because those who consisted of it were capable enough to become well established in a dog-eat-dog world. You don’t become established in this world of ours without having more than average on the ball. You know that from your military career. You were inducted a private and were discharged a major, the most decorated man to come out of the Asian War. You, yourself, are part of The Establishment.”

“Oh now, really,” Bert Alshuler said. “Until the professor’s offer came along, I was on Guaranteed Annual Income. Not exactly munificence.”

“That was possibly your own fault. I understand that you were offered a dozen lucrative positions by various corporations.”

“Based on my name. Based on being Killer Caine. I was even offered stardom in some Tri-Di shows. No thanks.”

The general said, with a bit more heat, The point is that The Establishment—a foolish term—has evolved, Caine. As always, power concentrates. Europe was a hundred thousand small fiefs and baronies during Medieval times. Slowly, she coalesced into kingdoms, then empires. Today, she is Common Europe, one whole. When that term, The Establishment, was first used, it included millions of persons. It included everyone who had an interest in the status quo. It is no longer millions. It has coalesced into a comparative handful. You are being given the chance to become part of this super-establishment, Major Caine.”

Jim looked at his old buddy and lifted his eyebrows mockingly.

Bert ignored him and said to the general, “Albert Alshuler, not Major Caine.”

“See here, Caine. I can turn to that phone screen over there and get in touch with the Octagon. And in half an hour you’ll be called up from reserve… possibly as a private, rather than with a major’s rank.”

Bert ran a palm over his mouth. “I don’t advise trying, General. That’s one thing about being a national hero. You throw weight. If I howl, the news boys have a field day.”

The professor, urgency in his voice, said, “Gentlemen, gentlemen. This is nonsense, I fear. Mr. Alshuler has unfortunately picked up some incorrect ideas.”

Bert looked at him in turn. “Kay. You tell me the right ones. Why was Killer Caine picked for this project?”

“For the very reason I told you.”

“My I.Q. doesn’t exactly brand me a genius.”

“We didn’t go solely by I.Q., my dear Alshuler. I told you that. We went by your Ability Quotient, only one element of which involves I.Q. Your I.Q., by the way, is 132 which puts you in the Very Superior category. But your Ability Quotient is composed of a score of other tests as well. How do you think you became Killer Caine, surviving where so many died? It was because of your quick reflexes, your ability to act coolly in the, ah, crunch, I believe you call it. It was your dexterity, your intuitive reactions in emergency. It is all these things which make up your Ability Quotient.”

“Man,” Jim chuckled. “My old buddy.”

The general looked at him. “Your own Ability Quotient was almost as high, Captain.”

Bert said, “So it was you who decided, eh?” He turned back to Leonard Katz. “What’s going on? Under these shots and pills Marsh has been giving me, I’ll be able to wade through every course this university offers in months, if not weeks.”

“Through every course the world offers, Alshuler.”

Bert was startled. “*What*?”

“Through the international data banks, my dear Alshuler, you can take the courses of any university in the West and even quite a few in the Soviet Complex, though using Mid-West University City as your base of studies. That course you completed in Early English emanated from Oxford. It was not ours. When you study French and French literature the courses will originate in the Sorbonne and German from Heidelberg. When you study engineering, it will be from Great MIT. Naturally, we won’t duplicate subjects. Most of your elementary courses will originate right here but it would be ridiculous for you to take our Russian courses, though we have them. When you get to Russian, you’ll study through the University of Moscow, or Leningrad. We are making arrangements for some courses in Mandarin at Peking.”

“This floors me,” Bert said. “But I want to get back to something earlier. Yesterday, I had a session with Assistant Professor Kenneth Kneedler, who evidently belongs to a group that figures you’re an opportunist. He read off a whole collection of quotes from various authorities who evidently viewed with alarm these breakthroughs in the development of the brain.”

Katz nodded. “I know Kneedler. Obviously, we don’t see eye to eye. The very existence of his organization, a split-off from the one to which the general and I belong, by the way, is an indication of the

dangerous forces which confront us and the need for us to make our way with care. Basically, his group desires to release our present information and devices to all. But, you see, Alshuler, a shifting of only 1.5 percent in the I.Q. of the whole population would more than double the number of people with I.Q.s of over 160. How many geniuses can we afford?"

"I'd think the more the better," Bert said.

"Possibly, but not necessarily. That is why we are treading so carefully. As G. R. Taylor put it, our society is adjusted to the basic facts of human mental attainment and weakness in many intricate ways. Any dramatic change in parameters such as intelligence, memory-power, emotionalism, ability to make decisions would create problems for which there is literally no precedent And if such knowledge lent increased power to those who might misuse it to influence or control others, might not undreamed-of tyrannies arise?"

Bert said suddenly, "Why me? Why Jill Masterson?" He looked from the professor to the general and back again. "Why don't you use these new processes on yourselves?"

The professor smiled ruefully. "To the extent possible, we have, although the stimulants you and Miss Masterson are being subjected to are the very latest and beyond what we have had in the past. However, they apply best to the young. As we grow older, they drop off drastically in effectiveness. The mental capacities of the human animal are at their peak between the ages of 15 and 25; after that they slowly fall off. Brain cells do not divide and a hundred thousand of them perish every day. Despite the brain's great margin of surplus capacity, eventually the effect is felt. To teach something really new to a man who has reached his four score years and ten is very difficult."

"Then, once again, why me? Why not get some kid of fifteen?"

The professor made a gesture of the obvious, his palms upturned. "Remember, we are going by Ability Quotient, not just I.Q. An adolescent doesn't have the experience behind him to be able to assimilate that which you and Miss Masterson can."

Bert Alshuler came to his feet, jammed his hands into his jacket pockets and prowled up and down in thought. Finally, he said, "Then what it amounts to is that Jill Masterson and I are guinea pigs. You want to see what will happen when we have become as completely educated as possible, and when our I.Q. and Ability Quotients have been as stimulated as possible."

"That is roughly correct."

"Kay. What happens when we have completed the course… the project?"

"That is what we are waiting to see. Future plans depend upon it."

“Kneedler mentioned the chance that the Soviet Complex or China might come up with the same breakthroughs and utilize them immediately.”

“In the name of Cain, don’t you think we’re aware of that?” General Paul said.

Bert thought about it. Finally, he said, “Kay. For the time, at least, I’ll go along with you and recommend the same to Miss Masterson. But I’ve got one demand.”

The other three looked at him.

Bert said flatly, “I want that damned Priority One, so far as the National Data Banks are concerned, lifted.”

“Priority One?” Professor Katz said. He looked at the general blankly.

The general was only a bit embarrassed. “I thought that in the early stages it might be better if they were restricted on what they could find out about the operation.”

The professor came back to Bert Alshuler. “Very well, we’ve now revealed a great deal more than we had expected to at this date. We’ll make immediate arrangements for unlimited priority so far as scholarly studies are involved.”

Bert stood. He said thoughtfully, “I begin to see why you used the expression, wealthy beyond my dreams of avarice. Jill and I will be the most educated persons the world has ever seen, won’t we?”

“Yes,” the professor said simply.

Chapter Fourteen

On the way down in the elevator, Jim Hawkins said, “Holy smokes.”

“Yeah,” Bert said.

Jim said, “You didn’t buy all that, old buddy?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. There are too many loose ends.”

“Like what? Old buddy, how can you lose? Imagine being the smartest man in the world.”

“I wouldn’t remain the smartest man in the world long. That’s the decision they’re going to have to come up with. As soon as they see that Jill’s brains and mine don’t leak out under the pressure, they’re going to have to decide who to give it to and how many of them. Is it going to be everybody, or a handful? It’s a decision I’d hate to have to make.”

“Maybe you will have to make it, old buddy. By that time you’ll be smarter than Katz, Marsh and Bugs Paul all wrapped together.”

Bert looked at him. “That’s another thing I don’t like. Remember the reputation Bugs Paul had over in Asia?”

Jim said slowly, “He was a little… ambitious.”

At the metro station in the basements, Jim said, “Look, you figure anything might happen between here and your apartment? If you don’t I’ll go over to my digs and gather up my things. I’m moving in with you until all this is through.”

Bert looked at him, frowning, “Isn’t this going to mess up your own studies?”

Jim grinned at him. “I’ve just resigned from the student body, old buddy. The old way’s too slow. Didn’t you hear what Bugs Paul told me? I was a runner-up. Maybe, when all the cards have been dealt in this game, it’ll be decided that I’m one of the next on the list to get the treatment. Like I said, I’ve always wanted to read the complete works of the Marquis de Sade, but they’re too lengthy.”

“You said, *War and Peace*.”

“Yeah, but then I was trying to project intelligence.”

Bert grunted. “Kay, old buddy, pack your things and come on over. I still have the uncomfortable feeling I could use a bodyguard.”

“And a chaperon, old buddy. I’m not forgetting my girl lives next door.”

Bert Alshuler made it back to the Administration Building without incident, but then, for some reason, he didn’t want to go up to his suite quite yet. He had spent *too* much time there in the past few days.

Spacious as it was, he had the feeling of being cooped up. He knew very well that the moment he got back into the study he would start cramming again and in a way, fascinating though it was, he revolted against so many hours at an auto-teacher. In the past he had only been a moderate student, studying enough to get by but not pushing it. He had the feeling now that the next weeks were going to be one of the longest drags he had ever been through.

So he dropped off into the auto-cafeteria where he had met Jill and Jim—was it only yesterday?

He took the same table they had been at before and put his Identity Card in the table's slot and called for a glass of imported British ale, a drink he had always liked but which hadn't been on his budget as a student on Guaranteed Annual Income. Evidently, just about anything was on his budget now.

When the brew came, he sipped it slowly. He was wondering what the computers would decide to give him next when someone said, "Major Caine?"

Bert looked up. "The name is Albert Alshuler."

"All right. Mind if I sit down?"

The newcomer was in his mid-thirties, neatly dressed, open-faced and didn't project being either a student or a member of the university's faculty.

Bert Alshuler shifted his shoulders so that his jacket draped in such manner as to facilitate a quick draw from the shoulder rig slung beneath his left armpit.

He said, "*I* have no monopoly on the table. However, there seem to be others in the vicinity that are empty."

The other nodded, but sat down. "My name's Harmon. Frank Harmon. I wanted to talk with you."

"Start talking, friend. Drink?"

"I'm on duty."

"Oh? What kind of duty?"

"Local Security. I'm a cop… Mr. Alshuler."

"Kay. What can I do for you?" Bert Alshuler finished his ale and summoned another one.

"Three students were killed yesterday and, we're not sure, but another seems to be missing."

Bert Alshuler was wide-eyed. "You mean here in town?"

"In the jurisdiction of this university city."

"Well, what's all this razzle about? What do you want with me?"

"They were killed with a laser."

Bert looked at him, frowning puzzlement. "So?"

"You're acquainted with the use of laser weapons?"

"Obviously. They were just coming in during the last months of

my service. For that matter there must be thousands of ex-military personnel in this city who have been checked out on lasers."

"But few so well as you and Captain Jim Hawkins."

Bert shrugged and took up his fresh glass. "What are you getting at, uh, Harmon?"

Frank Harmon looked at him for a long moment. "I was in the big one too, Killer."

"Don't call me that. I never asked for the handle and never liked it. So you were in the Asian War too. Does that make us old comrades in arms?"

"I'm not trying to antagonize you, Mr. Alshuler. This is my job. I don't want to intrude on you. I can understand you wanting to drop out of all the publicity crud they heaped on you. Like I say, I was in it too. I've got a lot of respect for… for the man who took as many decorations as you did."

Bert said, "I've mislaid my violin. What did you want, Harmon?"

"Where were you yesterday?"

"When? Mostly I was in my apartment."

"Your student mini-apartment in the Parthenon Building?"

Bert looked at him in disgust. "I assume you know better than that. Professor Leonard Katz has made arrangements for me to take over Suite G. in this building while I do some special courses utilizing new education methods he and some of his associates have dreamed up."

"Where were you at about two o'clock?"

"I imagine in my suite. I don't recall checking the time particularly during the afternoon. Why?"

"Because something strange happened. An electro-steamer was summoned down in the metro and was driven to the house in which the three students were found. Later it returned to this building again. The thing is, there is no record of whose identity card was utilized to rent the vehicle. Somehow that information was erased from the data banks."

Bert Alshuler tried to look pained. "Oh, now really. Do I look like somebody who has access to the data banks? I've only been in town a few days. I don't even know where the data banks are located, and I'm not an electronic technician. Why pick on me to question, Harmon?"

The other sighed. "We've never had a murder before in this university city. Certainly not three at a crack—performed with lasers. You turn up under an assumed name, are shortly established in luxurious quarters, although you have no known source of income beyond GAI, and in a few days three men are beamed down. What did you come here for, Alshuler?"

Bert projected disgust. "Would you believe to study?"

Frank Harmon said abruptly, indicating Bert's jacket, "You're heeled, aren't you, Alshuler? You're carrying a concealed weapon. Do you have a permit?"

"I wouldn't have any trouble getting one. Sure I'm heeled. Before I changed my name and underwent a little plastic surgery, I used to get a dozen crank letters a week. Every crackpot in the country would have loved to get his face in the news by knocking off Killer Caine."

"Is it a laser? They're forbidden to civilians, under any circumstances."

"Of course not. It's a gyro-jet."

"May I see it, please?"

"No. See here, friend, I'm getting tired of this. If you think you have anything on me, then take me and charge me. You'll have a hot potato on your hands when the news boys plaster the fact around that you've arrested the most highly decorated man to come out of the war, for carrying a gun for self-defense."

The Security man stared at him in frustration, then came to his feet. He said wearily, "All right, Alshuler. But something smells here and I'm going to find out what's causing the stench."

"Good luck," Bert said, and turned his attention back to his glass.

When Frank Harmon was gone, Bert Alshuler ran his right hand over his mouth unhappily. Double damn it.

These days, the police had methods undreamed of even a quarter of a century ago. He wondered if he had left any fingerprints, or anything else in that house where the shooting had taken place. Or if Jill had. Damn it Why hadn't he thought to check that out?

He brought his pocket phone from his jacket, activated it and said into the screen, "Lieutenant General Russell Paul. The number is undoubtedly restricted, but I assume I have priority."

The general's face faded in.

Bert said, "Can you scramble this so that it won't be recorded in the data banks, or anywhere else, for that matter?"

"Yes, if necessary."

"It's necessary."

"Just a moment, then." The other did something off screen and then came back, full face and looked at Bert quizzically. "Go on."

"Kay. There's one of your lower echelon boys here, Frank Harmon, who's bugging me, as Jim Hawkins would probably put it. That matter yesterday. Can't you have him transferred to Greater Denver, or something?"

"I see. I'll have him eliminated."

"Eliminated, for God's sake! Listen, he seems to be a good man. Bounce him up a grade or two—but send him to Alaska or Peru for the time being."

“Don’t be ridiculous, Major. I had no intention of physically eliminating the man.”

When the other’s face was gone, Bert returned the phone to his pocket. He said, meaninglessly, “Bugs Paul.”

His drink was suddenly tasteless to him. He got to his feet and wended his way through the tables and chairs to the door. He passed within a short distance of the two kids who had been with Jim and Jill the day before. They were seated, holding hands across the table, and staring raptly into each other’s faces. What were their names? Clyde and Betty. He grunted. Had he ever been that young? He had gone into the war at seventeen; he hadn’t had much time for youth.

He took the elevator up to the top floor and entered his apartment, thinking that part of the treatment that Marsh was giving him must involve stimulation of desire to achieve learning. He had always considered himself on the lazy side, before, but now he was keen to get to his next course.

Jill’s voice called, “Bert? Jim?” from her suite.

He went to the bedroom that adjoined her quarters and passed on through to her place. He called, “Jill? It’s Bert.”

She was in her living room.

She said something, but the words came out so fast, so run together, that he couldn’t make them out. When she moved, it was like one of the early silent movies where for gag reasons the Keystone Cops, or Charlie Chaplin, or whoever, were speeded up to an impossible pace.

Bert looked around. On the room’s small desk were two bottles he recognized. He went over and picked up the green one and shook out a pill. “Here take this.”

There was a carafe of water. He poured her a glass to chase down the pill. Although he had already been under the effect of Marsh’s stimulants himself several times, this was the first he had witnessed it in another. It was on the startling side.

The antidote worked with surprising speed.

She looked at him and shook her head as though in rejection. She said, “You were moving so slowly. As though you were an old, old man.”

“Yeah, I know. Obviously, Doc Marsh gave you your preliminary shot this morning and your turn-on and turn-off pills.”

She came over to him and put a hand on his arm. “Bert, it’s fantastic. Since you were here, I finished a course in Comparative Religion and one on the Humanities.”

He nodded. “I know. I’ve been on the stuff for several days now.”

She said, “You’ve seen Professor Katz? What did he say? What did he say about Kneedler’s accusations?”

“Among other things, he revealed that we are to be given what amounts to all the accumulated knowledge (he world possesses. Not just the complete curriculum of this university city, but all other schools in the world that have material not available here. Even some behind the so-called iron curtain. We’re to be made into walking encyclopedias. By the way, he claims your accusation was incorrect. They aren’t particularly interested in my, in our, I.Q.s. Evidently they can be, are being, stimulated.”

She said, “Bert, Bert. What in the name of heavens is this all about? What do they ultimately expect?”

He rubbed his mouth ruefully. “You know, Jill, I sometimes suspect they don’t even know. I get the feeling from Katz that they’re being pushed, at least the real scientists among them are. There are forces working that they’re not sure how to deal with. Elements like Kneedler’s group—God only knows how many of them there are—who want the information released to everybody. I get the feeling that General Paul, who is evidently high up in the thing, possibly their liaison man with the top echelons of the government, wants it restricted to an elite. He being one of them, of course. Then they’re being pushed by the fear that the Soviets or Chinese will hit on the same techniques.”

He took a deep breath. “We’re guinea pigs, Jill. According to what happens to us, they’ll move this way or that.”

“Bert,” she cried, “I’m afraid. It’s so fascinating that I don’t want to give it up, but I’m afraid.”

He took her into his arms and patted her on the back. She came very willingly.

She raised her face and, totally unexpected by them both, their lips met. He had a silly thought come to him, *two babes in the woods*. However, her generous mouth had a warm, delicately soft quality that he couldn’t remember ever experiencing with another woman.

A voice behind them said indignantly, “Hey, old buddy, that’s *my* girl.”

Chapter Fifteen

Bert and Jill came quickly apart, embarrassed.

Bert Alshuler said, “Jill had her wind up a little. I don’t blame her.”

Jim said, “Holy smokes, Killer. There’s not enough of her for both of us. She’s too small. Share and share alike is all great between buddies, but there comes a point—”

“Oh, good heavens, Jim, don’t be silly,” Jill protested. “You’re not my lord and master.” She looked up into Bert’s face and there was a new shine in her eyes that irritated him. Damn it all, he hadn’t asked for this. He had no intention of stepping on his friend’s toes.

Bert said gruffly, “Let’s go back into the other apartment and have a pow-wow. There’s some stuff to discuss.”

“No hooch,” Jim told her. “They put a nice bar in Bert’s joint, but they evidently figure ladies don’t drink.”

Back in Suite G, Jim took over the bar. “How about me mixing a John Brown’s Body?” he asked, staring at the collection of bottles happily.

“How about a beer instead?” Bert growled. “We’ve got some thinking to do.”

“Beer?” Jim said plaintively. “With all this fancy hooch?”

“Shut up, you rummy, and bring the beer and sit down.”

When they were organized in chairs, drinks in hand, Bert Alshuler said, “The time has come for Machiavellian tactics.”

“Come again?” Jim said.

Bert said, “I continually get the impression in this whole deal that nobody is being straight forward. There are wheels within wheels. I get the feeling that everybody involved has a different idea of what the end product should be.”

“Even Professor Katz?” Jill wanted to know. “He strikes me as having a basic integrity.”

“Maybe. But he’s got something up his sleeve we don’t know about. And somehow I get the feeling that possibly General Paul doesn’t know about it either.”

“So what do we do?” Jim said, crossing his impossibly long legs.

Bert looked at Jill. “The theory is that we study the subjects that the computers shove off on us. It’s probably a valid idea so far as the project is concerned. They’d undoubtedly take us along, step by step, until we’d assimilated everything there was to be assimilated.”

“I can see it coming,” Jim chortled. “Old Killer Caine’s going to fox them.”

“What can we do instead?” Jill said cautiously.

"Oh, we can study the courses the computers give us. We'll have to, or Marsh, or Katz, or some of the other eggheads who must be in on this will smell a rat. However, we only spend half of our time at our scheduled courses."

"And the other half?" Jill asked.

"When this started, they lowered my priority rating on the National Data Banks to One, so that I couldn't stick my nose into angles they didn't want me to know about, at least not yet. And I suspect they did the same to you. But today I put it to them and Katz agreed to an unlimited priority—short of classified military and such, I imagine. At any rate, we're now free to dig out anything in the National Data Banks that's there."

She was beginning to get it.

Bert leaned forward. "This big explosion in the field of neurophysiology and related subjects started at least a quarter of a century ago. Some of the research people got a mite frightened at some of the ramifications and they've done a bang-up job of keeping a lot of the developments from the layman. But it's all there, somewhere in the data banks. It has to be. Kay. We're going to fish it out. We're going to learn as much or more about the subject than Katz and Marsh and all the rest of them do."

Jill said, "It seems sort of underhanded."

"It's known as self-defense," Bert said.

Jim said, "Okay. What am I doing while you two are about all this super-cramming? Sitting around as kind of a bodyguard, sipping up this fancy booze—I hope?"

Bert shook his head, "No, you exercise these special abilities of yours that I didn't know you had until a couple of days ago."

"Oh, oh," Jim said. "Such as?"

"Can you get into that penthouse of Katz'?"

"Why?"

"Because somewhere there are probably papers, or whatever, that deal with this whole project. We need a look at them. We also need a look at Bugs Paul's secret, secrets."

"Oh, swell. I can just see me prowling the Octagon."

"What we want wouldn't be in the Octagon. It'd be in his private house or apartment, wherever he lives. And, in view of his position in Security, it's doubtful if anyone expects burglars to be breaking into his place."

"Burglar?" Jim said, aggrieved. "That's a devil of a handle to hang on me. I'm currently a scholar and a gentleman."

"Can you do it?"

"I guess I can try, Killer."

They began their new campaign immediately, Bert and Jill going

to their respective studies and turning on with the brown pills.

Bert checked out whether or not his priority rating in (he data banks had been changed as promised. He dialed information, put his card in the screen slot and said, “What is my priority rating?”

“Priority Five, Mr. Alshuler.”

Fine. He assumed that Jill’s had also been upped. He didn’t know exactly what a five priority meant but it seemed satisfactory, if Jim Hawkins, as a university student, had only a three.

Yesterday, with Jim’s card he had been able to get various books on neuro-physiology, but had been stymied in looking into the science beyond a certain point. He recalled some of the books and authors involved and now requested them. And soon realized how lacking in background he was to make a serious study.

After an hour or two, he called it quits for the time being and went over to his auto-teacher and took up his examination stylus.

“Next subject,” he said.

“Elementary Biology,” the screen’s voice told him.

Well, at least that would fit in with his secret research. It was one of his difficulties in his studies of the highly specialized field of medicine. He hadn’t the scientific background to understand enough of it, no matter how stimulated his I.Q. and perception.

He got through the biology course and one in beginning French before stopping. He had a sneaking suspicion that although he already had a sizable vocabulary in the language and could read it fairly well, he’d have his work cut out communicating with any Frenchman. His accent was undoubtedly atrocious and he didn’t see how they were going to improve it much on an auto-teacher. Picking up an acceptable accent in a foreign tongue was largely experience.

The three of them had dinner together in Bert’s dining room and went into more details of their campaign. It was astonishing how much food Jill was capable of putting away.

Jim stared at her. “How in the devil am I ever going to afford that appetite when we’re married?”

“Ha,” she said. “Where’d you get the idea we were going to be married, lover boy?”

He portrayed hurt “It’s my fondest dream.”

“Nightmare, you mean,” she told him. “I’d have to have a stepladder to get up to where I could kiss you.”

“I could scrooch down,” he said.

It was decided that Bert and Jill would take four auto-teacher courses a day, two in the morning, two in the afternoon. That should be enough to divert suspicion. But between hours and in the evenings they would cram up on books in the National Data Banks. A few textbooks assimilated and they should be in a position to go deeper

into the subject.

Jim was going to have to wait until his arm was healed before he could do his prying, but the inactivity worried him not at all.

Bert did a lead on the girl by waking, as usual, at dawn. He got a full course under his belt, German, before she appeared for breakfast. After breakfast, he got in another course, more math, before the door of the suite pinged. He took one of the green pills and went into the living room. Jim was sprawled before the Tri-Di set, a long drink in his left hand.

Bert said, in disgust, "Why didn't you get the door?"

"I figured you needed a break, old buddy. Besides, it'll be for you, not me."

It was the inevitable Professor Marsh but this time he was accompanied by another, an efficient looking younger man Bert Alshuler hadn't seen before. He carried a rather bulky case.

Bert said, "Doctor Smith, I presume," and followed the other back into the living room.

Marsh didn't bother to introduce them. He said, "We have a few tests to be made, but first let me give you your regular shots."

"I'm beginning to feel like a pin cushion," Bert complained mildly.

Marsh ignored him and began to bring forth the usual equipment. At the same time, his companion put his case on a table and opened it. It was full of shiny, sterile looking medical equipment. Bert groaned.

There were three shots from Marsh and then they sat him in a straight chair and the newcomer began taking blood samples, giving him injections, examining him for reflexes and in general giving him a checkout such as he hadn't had since being hospitalized during the war.

Jim said to Marsh, "Hey, Doc, how about taking a gander at this wing of mine? I'm getting tired of stashing it in this sling."

Marsh went over to him.

The technician said to Bert, "Have you ever had children?"

"I'm not even married."

The other looked at him patiently.

"Not so far as I know," Bert said. "I'm sterile."

"Sterile!" Marsh blurted, turning as quickly as his plump body allowed. "Are you jesting?"

"No. Why not? One of those temporary deals. If and when I get married and want kids, I have another treatment. Latest thing in controlling the population explosion."

"Oh." The professor turned back to Jim. "You're about healed up."

Finished with Bert Alshuler, the two went on into Jill's suite.

The following day, Jim Hawkins took off, after shucking his arm sling and securing a shoulder rig holster similar to that of Bert's from the arms cache. He didn't show up that night, nor was he present when Marsh returned, alone, the following morning.

Bert and Jill met at meal times, but otherwise continued their campaign at a punishing pace. The computers were giving her a somewhat different series of studies from Bert's, evidently keyed to her own Ability Quotient. Both were making progress in their investigations into medicine and particularly those relating to the brain but were still not up to the most advanced studies.

At lunch the following day, even though Bert had taken his green pill, he seemed to note that the second hand of his watch was moving at less than normal speed. Ho checked with Jill's and noted the same.

He grimaced at her. "You know, I think that some of this speeded up metabolism is becoming permanent. Not all of it, but some of it."

"I think you're right and I believe stimulated I.Q. is sinking in as well. It seems to me I can think faster and better even when I'm not on the drugs."

Bert said thoughtfully, "We'd better watch it. God only knows what the end will be, but we're in it now for the duration. I suggest that when others are around, possibly even Jim, that we deliberately speak slowly and move slowly."

"Perhaps you're right."

There had been no more physical contact, nor any allusion to the incident of the other day, but there was a growing awareness between them. Bert disliked the situation, in view of his old friend's feelings, but he was afraid it was getting beyond his control. From time to time when they were together he had to steel himself against physical contact with her. And he seemed to note an amused glint in her eyes, a slightly mocking quality that unnerved him.

That afternoon, following lunch and just before taking his stimulant, Bert heard a slight sound behind him. He spun and almost drew his gun, but then recognized the man leaning in the study's doorway, a gyro-jet pistol in hand.

It was Frank Harmon, the Security man. "Don't go for it, Major Caine," he said. "Like I told you, I too was in the big one. I can handle a shooter possibly just as well as you."

Bert said, "You startled me. An old combat man's reflexes are automatic when somebody comes up behind him. How did you get in here? Do you have a warrant?"

Harmon looked about the study, ignoring the questions. "So you were telling the truth. One of the professors has you up here on a special study experiment."

"That's right," Bert said, forcing himself to simmer down. "Come

on into the living room and tell me what this is all about."

Frank Harmon followed him into the other room, his gun at the easy ready. Bert sat down and looked politely inquiring; the Security man remained standing.

"The other day," he said, "the same day as the shoot out, an assistant professor in political economy, Kenneth Kneedler, disappeared. His offices were in this building. The lock of the door had been shot off with a laser beam. Immediately previous to his disappearance there had been some inquiries about him and his whereabouts to the computers. Whose Identity Card was utilized to acquire the information had been wiped from the data banks. I was looking into it further when I was suddenly informed I had been promoted to captain and assigned to Hawaii."

"Congratulations," Bert said.

"I'm not going, Caine."

"Alshuler," Bert said mildly. "Why bother to tell me about it?"

The Security man motioned with his gun. "Line up against the wall over there. Lean up against it with your hands, and spread your legs wide. I want to take a look at that gun of yours. Say no, and I'll take you in."

Bert's mind raced. If he could talk this character out of it, it might go no further. But if he was taken down to headquarters and booked, then it would be all over the town, probably all over the world, in short order, and then God only knew who might start prying further.

He shrugged and came to his feet and went over to the wall and leaned against it, in the standard position used for shaking down prisoners. Harmon came up behind him with great care which amused Bert—there was nothing like having a reputation—reached around and drew the gun from its underarm holster. Harmon stepped back.

"A laser," he said. "You claimed you carried a gyro-jet."

Bert turned and his voice took on a weary note. "I did, when you asked me there in the auto-cafeteria. I just got that yesterday."

"You have a permit for it, of course. There is no such thing as a permit to carry a laser pistol."

"Of course."

"Where is it?" the other said scornfully.

"The general hasn't sent it around yet."

"What general? Where did you get this gun, Caine?"

"Alshuler. Your superior, General Russell Paul, gave it to me. He's an old war acquaintance. When I told him about all the shooting that was going on around here, he insisted that he issue me a laser. I didn't really think I needed it, but he insisted."

The other snapped, "You expect me to believe that?"

"You can always call the general, friend."

Jill entered from the bedroom that connected with her own suite. She looked from Bert to the newcomer, surprised, especially in view of the fact that Frank Harmon had a gun in each hand.

Bert's mind was working rapidly. The implication of her coming out of what was obviously a bedroom was clear.

He said, "Darling, this is Frank Harmon, of Security. He has a few questions to ask. For instance, where was I at two o'clock last Thursday? Remember, that was the day those three students were shot in that mysterious affair out in the suburbs."

She said, "Why, darling, you were right here with me, all afternoon."

Frank Harmon was obviously set back.

Bert said to him, "Well, aren't you going to call the general?"

Harmon said, "Bugs Paul is the one who gave the orders to ship me off to Hawaii. I'm taking you in, Caine. A little truth serum down at headquarters and we'll get to the bottom of this before the general even hears about it."

From the doorway behind him a new voice said, "So they still call him Bugs. I'll have to let him know about that."

Chapter Sixteen

Frank Harmon shot a startled look over his shoulder. Jim Hawkins stood there, a benign look on his face, a laser pistol in hand, nonchalantly trained on Harmon.

He said, “I’ve been out here in the hall, taking most of this in. You sure are an eager beaver, Harmon. Uh, Jim Hawkins is the handle.”

Harmon said inanely, “You wouldn’t dare shoot. I’m taking you both in.”

Jim chuckled softly. “Old buddy, you’ve been accusing Bert and me of bumping off three men, kind of putting the snatch on an assistant professor and all sorts of fun and games. Now if we’d really swing all that, do you think we’d hesitate knocking off one more?”

Harmon’s face registered indecision.

Jim said to Bert Alshuler in mock complaint, “See how it is? Everybody thinks I’m just an easygoing slob. Now if *you’d* give him his marching orders, Killer, he’d be out of here in a hurry.”

Harmon said wanly, “Your own reputation is as notorious as the major’s, Captain Hawkins.” He tossed Bert’s gun to the couch. “This isn’t the end, you know.” I le returned his own gun to a hip holster.

Jim said, his voice friendly, “When you contact the general, remember me to him. Used to make dates for him, locate decent booze for him, get him home when it got a little drunk out; shucks, I was the most valuable member of his staff there in Siam.”

Frank Harmon growled something inarticulately and brushed by the lanky Hawkins on his way out.

When he was gone, Bert snapped, “How much of that did you hear?”

“Practically all of it. I came in the front door, just as you two were entering this room. I stood out in the hall and listened.” He leered at Jill. “I even heard the little bit that suggested you two were shacked up here.”

“Oh, don’t be silly, Jim,” she said. “It obviously made a perfect alibi.”

Bert went over to the bar for drinks. “How about a cognac, all around?” he said. “We could use one. Where’ve you been, Jim?”

“Make mine a double,” Jim said, returning his gun to its holster. “Running errands for my old buddy.”

Jill sank into a chair. “Make mine a double too,” she said wearily. “This is beginning to pile up on me. I don’t have the background you two do. I get frightened.”

Jim chuckled, “Nobody has the background we two do, Sweetie Pie. This would have been considered a restful weekend in the old

days."

Bert said, "Easy, Jim. The poor kid's about had it" He brought the three drinks and handed the others theirs.

He said to Jim, "You'd better get the general on the phone and let him know what happened. Tell him to get this man off our backs soonest. Harmon's not stupid, and he's sore. If he's on this another twenty-four hours he'll crack something and even generals can't cover over three killings, particularly when the three are students, rather than mugs."

Jim started for the phone screen, saying over his shoulder, "What the devil happened to Kneedler? He walked out of here all right."

Bert knocked back half of his brandy. "He's probably gone to ground. Hiding out with some of his group. He's got his wind up. Too much shooting going on. He's probably okay."

While Jim Hawkins got through to General Paul, Bert and Jill sat silently nursing their drinks.

Bert said finally, "Come up with anything today?"

"Not too much, but I'm beginning to get an idea of the magnitude of some of these breakthroughs. They must absolutely scare the men who are making them. You?"

"I'm getting the same feeling. Did you come up against that bit by Arthur C. Clarke about the education machine?"

"No."

"I'll tell you about it later."

Jim came back, grinning. "Old Bugs is hopping. He says he'll clobber poor Harmon."

Bert said, "Did you find out anything about Katz and the general?"

"Some. Not much. With phone screens people don't write much in the way of letters any more, and with the data banks always available they don't even take much in the way of notes. However…"

"You mean you actually got into Katz' penthouse?"

Jim grinned at him. "That wasn't much of a problem."

"Possibly not for you, but it sure as hell would have been for me. How did you get up that restricted elevator and past the door identity screens?"

"I didn't," Jim Hawkins grinned. "Remember Fred Durkin who was with the helio-jets? Well, he's got a job crop dusting not far from here. Has a personal mini-helio of his own, a two-seater. At any rate, he sat me down, real quiet-like, right on the fancy landscaping job Katz did on his roof."

Bert appropriated a term out of his friend's vocabulary. "Holy smokes," he said. "And nobody spotted you?"

"It was about two in the morning. But that wasn't it. You know

something, Bert? Katz doesn't live there. Or, at least, not much. The place is deserted."

Both Jill and Bert Alshuler frowned at him, not understanding.

Jim said, "So I took my time prowling the joint. You know all those books he had there in his study? They were in at least twenty languages. Not just the usual European ones, but such off-beats as Tagalog, Chinese and Arabic, and those books were well used. You know something, Bert? I've got a suspicion that Professor Katz already has all this education that you're still working on."

Bert Alshuler grunted surprise at that. "What else did you find?"

"Only one thing that makes any difference to us—if it does. A list of names with Ability Quotient ratings." There was a smirk on his face. "You were pretty well down the list, Bert. Even Jill, here, had a higher rating than yours." He brought a paper from an inner pocket. "There were several copies. I brought the top sheet of one of them. The full list was pretty long."

Bert took the list and scowled down at it His name was about sixteenth from the top.

He said, "Did you get anything about the general at all?"

"Not much. I got into his house. He has a place in Lincoln Heights, Greater Washington. I thought he'd be in bed, but he came in with some broad just as I was beginning to look around. I had to hide in a closet and stayed there for something like four hours. Believe me, it was a chore."

"Save the gory details," Jill murmured.

Bert said, "Well?"

"They talked some, of course. He was a few sheets in the wind. But you can't expect him to go over his complete plans, just because I'm so handily located in the closet that I can hear what he said. However, I got the impression that old Bugs and Katz aren't as buddy-buddy as you and I are, old buddy."

"How do you mean?"

"I got the feeling that they hang out together because they need each other. Paul has the in with the government and Katz needs it, and Katz has these techniques he's using on you two, and Paul wants them. But anyway, I got the feeling that old Bugs is about to act, about to lower the boom on the professor."

"How?"

"I don't know. Just some of the things he said to the chick. She must be one of his secretaries, or something. Maybe his mistress. It sure as the devil wasn't his wife."

Jill looked at Bert, "What in the name of heavens is going on?"

"I don't know," Bert said grimly. "Let's see if we can find out anything."

He got up and went over to the phone screen. He dialed University Information and said, “What is the position of Professor Leonard Katz on the faculty? What does he teach?”

The robot-like voice said, “Professor Katz is not a member of the faculty of Mid-West University City. He is sometimes a visitor and has been given a permanent office. When the Professor is in residence, it is considered a honor to have him in our midst.”

It took a long moment for Bert to think up the next question. He said, “Where is the Professor permanently based? Where does he teach?”

“That information is not available.”

“What the devil,” Jim said.

Bert Alshuler had the list of names and Ability Quotient ratings in his hand. He traced a finger down the list until he came to Temple Alonzo Woolley.

“Well, there wouldn’t be many of those,” he muttered, dialing Information. He said into the screen, ” *I* wish to speak to Temple Alonzo Woolley. I do not have his identity number. All I know about him is that he is probably between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five.”

Shortly, a face faded it. It was a young man’s face, intelligent, clean-cut, handsome. He was frowning at this long distance call.

Bert said, “Mr. Wooley, if you don’t mind, could you tell me from where you are speaking?”

“Why, from my study. Who are you?”

“I mean from what town?”

“Why, here in Berkeley University City.”

“I see. You’re participating in Professor Katz’ new teaching project, aren’t you?”

“How did you know? It is supposed to be very restricted.”

“I know,” Bert said sourly. “I’m on it too. It’s evidently not as restricted as we were led to believe. One other question. Are there any other students in Berkeley on it?”

“I don’t know why I should tell you but as a matter of fact, there is. One other. Dorothy Wheeler. Now, just who are you to be asking questions?”

Bert said, “Listen. You look too young to have been in the war.”

“What’s that got to do with it? I wasn’t.”

“Where did you take your Ability Quotient tests?”

“Why, when I applied for university entrance I was informed that my I.Q. was exceptionally high and was offered the chance to compete for special tuition and a scholarship. I made the highest Ability Quotient rating and Professor Katz gave me this opportunity.”

“Oh, you did. And this Dorothy Wheeler was second.”

“Why, yes. But who are you and—”

Bert flicked him off. “You aren’t very good at keeping secrets, friend,” he muttered.

Jill began to say something, but he interrupted her. “Just a minute. Something else occurs to me.”

He traced his finger down the list of names and finally came to Manfred Von Kauzchen.

He said over his shoulder, “What’s the biggest university in that part of Common Europe that used to be Germany?”

“Heidelberg, I suppose,” Jill said.

He dialed International and said, “The University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, Common Europe.”

A woman’s face faded in and Bert said in atrocious German, “Do you have a student named Manfred Von k’auzchen?”

She did something to one side and in less than a minute was back, full face. “Da. Would you rather speak in English?”

“Yes,” he said thankfully. “May I talk to him, please?”

Moments later, a new face faded in; one of the most Germanic faces Bert Alshuler could ever remember seeing: blonde, blue eyed, square and with that certain aggressiveness that is unmistakably Teutonic.

Bert said in English, “You are acquainted with Professor Leonard Katz?”

The other’s English was almost as poor as Bert’s German, but he said, “Yes, I am acquainted with the Herr Professor.”

Bert said carefully, “Herr Kauzchen, are you a participant in his new educational methods project?”

The other glared at him. “That is a secret!” he snapped. “I will not talk with you.” He clicked off.

Bert came to his feet and returned to the others.

He said, “That’s what I thought. Our big authority on the human brain has his project going in universities all over the world.” He checked down the list again. Dorothy Wheeler’s name was twentieth.

Jim finished off his drink and went to replenish it “Nope, you made a mistake there, old buddy.”

Bert said, “How do you mean?”

“Katz isn’t a particularly big authority on the brain. It isn’t his field at all.”

Chapter Seventeen

Bert said, "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"I told you I prowled his study up there in the penthouse. Went through some of the books he's done and all. I sure as the devil was out of my depth but I can tell you one thing, his specialty has nothing to do with the brain."

Jill said, "But he won a Nobel Prize once."

"So I've heard, Sweetie Pie, but not in any field even remotely involving the brain, or education, or speeding up I.Q." Bert and Jill stared at him for a moment "Well, what was it in?" Bert said.

"Search me. Some field of medicine, I guess, but it's all so specialized now I didn't even recognize the name. Shucks, all I am is a sophomore in this overgrown school."

Bert looked at Jill. "What did he win his Nobel Prize for?"

"Why, I don't know. I've heard that he won one, some years ago. When he first contacted me, I assumed that this project of his was in conjunction with the field in which he made his reputation. It was one of the reasons I had confidence in him, in spite of all the mysterious goings-on."

Bert Alshuler ran his palm over his mouth in supreme irritation. He got up and paced the room twice, his hinds jammed into his jacket pockets. Then he looked at Jill and said, "I asked you about that bit from Arthur C. Clarke. You haven't run into it, eh?"

"No. Not as yet."

"I think I can remember it, word for word. It comes from an old time book of his called *Profiles of the Future:* '…the mechanical educator—or some technique which performs similar functions—is such an urgent need that civilization can not continue for many more decades without it. The knowledge of the world is doubling every ten years and the rate itself is increasing. Already, twenty years of schooling are insufficient; soon we will have died of old age before we have learned to live, and our entire culture will have collapsed owing to its incomprehensible complexity.' "

Jim gave him a surprised look. "Holy smokes, old buddy, have all these shots and all gotten you to the point where you can recite whole paragraphs of stuff *you've* read just once?"

"Yes."

Jill said, "What do you conclude from that, Bert?"

"*I* don't know." He stopped pacing and headed for the phone screen again. "Possibly that it's time for a showdown."

He flicked the screen alive and said, "Professor Leonard Katz."

In a moment the screen said, "Professor Katz does not respond.

He has restricted his phone to top priority."

Bert said, "Then Professor Ralph Marsh."

Marsh's face faded in. "Confound it, Alshuler, what is it now? I seem to be free from your harassment only for a few hours a day."

Bert Alshuler ignored that. "I want to get in touch with Katz."

"He is out of town."

"He is practically always out of town for the very good reason that this isn't his town. And I begin to suspect that no other town is either. He keeps on the move. He has to, to cover all his territory. Kay, Marsh. This is an ultimatum. Get both Kate and General Paul up to that penthouse the professor uses when he's here in Mid-West. You come along too, Marsh, and anybody else in this vicinity that might be a big-wig in your whole conspiracy."

"Conspiracy, conspiracy! Are you jesting! Why, why, who do you think you are to order us about, Alshuler?"

"I'll tell you who I am, friend," Bert said, his voice ice. "I'm the guy on whom they hung the name Killer Caine. And I have the reputation of being able to cause more trouble than any man who survived the Asian War. Get them here soonest, Marsh. Within two hours—two hours is enough by vacuum tube transport—or I begin to blow the whistle and start one of the biggest stinks this planet has ever seen."

He snapped the screen off.

"Holy smokes, old buddy," Jim said. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"No."

Jim worked his lanky form to his feet and headed for the bar. "Then we'd better have another drink, old buddy."

"Stay away from that liquor, you rummy. I need you clear-headed."

Jim ignored him.

Bert flicked on the phone screen again and said into it, "Captain Frank Harmon, of Security."

Harmon's face came on and when he saw who it was he glowered.

Bert bit out, "Can you get hold of Kenneth Kneedler?"

"Why?"

"Never mind. Answer."

The other's face worked, but he said, "As a matter of fact, I can. That is, I just found out where he is. But I've been discharged, Caine. I suspect through your efforts."

"The hell with that. You know where Kneedler is, eh?"

"Yes. The fool is no conspirator. He left his apartment without taking anything with him. In a hurry, evidently. But just a couple of hours ago, he used his Identity Card to order a few things from an

ultra-market. Pajamas and such, for Christ sake. We zeroed in on him. He's holed up in the apartment of a friend."

"Kay. Get him. Have him in the penthouse on top of the Acropolis Building two hours from now."

"Why?"

"Because there's going to be a showdown and he ought to be there. A showdown involving those four students who were finished off."

Harmon sucked in breath, "Four?"

"Yes, four. Not three."

"All right, Caine. We'll both be there."

"No, just him. You'll be up above in a police helio-jet, waiting for me to call you in."

"I told you, I've just been bounced."

"I suspect you have close friends in local Security. You be there, Harmon."

Frank Harmon, his face still working, held silence for a moment. Then he said, "Check… Killer." His face faded out.

Bert Alshuler turned back to the other two. Jim, tall glass in hand, had resumed his comfort chair. His easygoing face registered boredom. "Fun and games," he said.

Bert said, "Have you recharged your shooter since you used it?"

"Nope."

Bert stood. "Recharge it and put a spare or two in your pocket."

Jim muttered sourly and came to his feet. "I used to get special combat pay for this sort of thing," he complained, heading for the arms cache.

Bert looked at Jill.

She licked her lower lip nervously and said, "You want me to be there?"

He shook his head. "There's probably going to be trouble."

"What kind of trouble… darling?"

Jim looked over his shoulder at her, his eyebrows raised, but continued on his way.

"I don't really know," Bert said, "but you don't have to be there." He headed for his study.

Inside, he picked up his pill bottles and shook one out of each. He put the brown pill in his right hand jacket pocket, the green in his left, not really knowing why he was doing it.

He went on back to the living room and said to Jim, "Kay, let's go. I'd like to get the layout a little more, before the others arrive."

Jim said, "You think we can get in?"

"Yes. If we have any trouble, the stink starts sooner than originally expected. From now on, we start throwing weight."

Chapter Eighteen

They had no difficulty in getting into the penthouse. Evidently Katz, or someone, had instructed the building's computers to admit them. They were the first to arrive.

Jim took his companion through the house.

"See? Don't you get the unlived-in atmosphere?"

"Yes. I wonder in how many towns he has layouts like this."

Jim said, "Well, think about it. If he's got even part of the dope in his head that you and Jill are supposed to wind up with, it wouldn't be hard to make all the dough in the world doing just about anything he wanted to do."

Bert led the way back to the library and sat down before the phone screen. He put his Identity Card in the slot and said, "National Data Banks. Information. In what field did Professor Leonard Katz take his Nobel Prize?"

"In Gerontology."

Bert Alshuler snapped off the set, and leaned back in his chair.

Jim, who had stationed himself at the bar and was contemplating the bottles there, evidently hard put to decide with which to treat himself, said, "What in the devil is Gerontology?"

"Stay away from that liquor, damn it. We can't afford to be smashed. A gerontologist studies aging in man and how to avoid it. There hasn't been a great deal published on the subject lately. At least, not much that's been released through the news media."

Jim poured himself a snort of Metaxa and returned with it to a chair in the room's center. He sprawled in it and looked at Bert critically. "You know, old buddy, this super-education bit is beginning to get to you. You used to talk like a guy, an old pro soldier. Now you're beginning to sound like some stuffed shirt. Where'd you pick up that cultivated accent bit?"

"Shut up," Bert said sourly. "I'm trying to think."

The others came in a group. It seemed likely that Katz, Marsh and General Paul had met Kneedler in the lobby and he had, probably defiantly, told them that he had been invited to the showdown. At any rate, when they entered he made a point of staying away from the other three.

Leonard Katz looked at Bert and Jim thoughtfully, Marsh in testy disgust. The general, as usual, was expressionless save for a quizzical quality in his eyes.

"Shall we all get comfortable?" Professor Katz said. "The bar is over there, if anyone would like a drink. Captain Hawkins, I see you have already anticipated my invitation."

No one else was in the mood for refreshment.

When they were seated, the Professor looked at Bert and lifted his eyebrows ruefully. “It is your turn, my dear Alshuler.”

Bert said, “Your field is Gerontology, rather than the brain or education.”

“I never claimed otherwise. I took a Nobel Prize in Gerontology. However, I am knowledgeable in various fields.”

Marsh snorted humor, but no one looked at him.

Assistant Professor Kenneth Kneedler blurted, “Why did you gunmen have me brought here?”

Bert said, “You didn’t have to come if you didn’t want to. I doubt if you’re head man of your group, but you are the only one I know of and thought you’d want to be represented.” He looked back at Katz. “You have given us the impression that Jill Masterson and I were the only two students on this new educational project, that we were more or less pathfinders, that the techniques aren’t fully worked out. However, I find that the same experiment is taking place in various universities all over the world. And I suspect that in each case the situation is duplicated. That is, one man and one woman. And I also begin to suspect that they are thrown into each other’s company deliberately, under circumstances that could lead to their becoming more… friendly.”

Jim stirred at that and scowled.

Katz said, “You possibly misunderstood, Alshuler. We do not deny that the experiment is taking place in a good many universities.”

“It’s gone beyond the need of more experimentation,” Kneedler blurted. “It should now be released to all.”

The general said gruffly, “Which would lead to chaos. It is true that the process has been developed to the point where release of it is practical. But it should be confined to the elite, those who are in a position to utilize it intelligently. It is, obviously, not for every Tom, Dick and Harry.”

Professor Katz held up a hand for silence. He said to Bert, “You’ve evidently been quite busy. What else do you think you have discovered?”

“That you, yourself, have probably gone through the procedure. I doubt if you discovered it; probably many scientists were involved. But you were possibly the first guinea pig, not people like Jill and myself. I have also found that our Ability Quotients weren’t as high as you led us to believe. Both of us were rather far down the list.”

Bert hesitated a minute, then looked at the general. “I think my first real clue came when I ran into a passage from G. R. Taylor in a paper he did entitled *New Minds For Old*. I think I can recite it. There is… the danger of creating an elite group, all the more dangerous

socially because it will be genuinely an elite. Those who have been operated upon… may well feel a genuine kinship with other super-brains, and as a group the super-brains may tend to work for their own preferential treatment, even if they do not actually seek to take over the reins of power. There is the possibility that such an elite, having assumed power, should deny the treatment which produces intelligence to any but a minority, perhaps their own offspring, thus perpetuating a two-caste society… Even if we do not push the prediction to these extremes, we can see that the possibility of a have and a have-not group, intellectually speaking, in society is a real one.' "

He looked at General Paul. "That brought you to mind, General, and what you said about rule by an elite."

"It's the only kind of rule that makes sense," the general said flatly. "A true elite. Today, the United States of the Americas. Tomorrow the world."

"No!" Kneedler shouted. "It should be released democratically, to all!"

The general snorted contempt. "Nine-tenths and more of the common people neither could handle nor would want an I.Q. of 400 and an education far and beyond anything available today."

Bert said to the general, "You're right, of course. The elite should rule—I prefer the term 'lead,' in this present age. However, the question becomes, who are the elite? And it arises with each new generation. When man was under tribal society, the council of chiefs, elected from each clan, were the elite, and led the tribe. But the thing is, the moment they stopped being the best men to lead, they were no longer the elite and steps had to be taken to remove them from their positions. The same applied when kings and high priests ruled. As soon as they were no longer the best men, no longer the true elite, then they had to be overthrown, or society was in chaos. The same with feudalism. As long as the aristocrats were really aristocrats they could be, and should have been, tolerated, but as soon as they deteriorated, it was time for the revolt on the part of those who were really suited to rule, or lead."

"What in the name of Cain are you driving at?" the general demanded.

"You obviously represent a group that think of themselves as the nation's elite, born to command. But I wonder, particularly in view of what I know about your own abilities… and ambitions. Certainly, if you got your hands on this technique and could utilize it yourselves and prevent anyone else from doing so, you would become our ruling class and could maintain yourselves in that position indefinitely. No thanks, General."

“Why, you ass! Don’t you see that you, yourself, are in on the ground floor of this? You would be one of us!”

Bert looked at him with disgust. ” *I* did not ask to be. I had most of my driving ambition burned out of me back when I was heading the Elite Service. Since then I’m a little philosophical about elites.”

“Holy smokes,” Jim muttered, unwinding himself to his feet. “My old buddy sure does talk pretty these days.” He repaired to the bar, poured himself another, and leaned there.

Bert ignored him and turned back to Professor Katz. “And where do you stand, Professor? Whom do you back? Kneedler’s group, which wants to release your new mind expanding and teaching techniques to everyone, or the general’s, which wants a small minority to have it so that they can dominate the country, and ultimately the world?”

The professor smiled his rueful smile. “You have presented the case very neatly, my dear Alshuler. Very well, I will tell you. Neither.”

All eyes were on him.

Katz leaned forward, the tips of his finger together. “I am afraid that with the exception of Professor Marsh here, one of our inner circle, none of you have seen quite all of the cards.”

The general snapped, “What does that mean, Katz?”

Leonard Katz ignored him and continued to speak to Bert. “You are mistaken in one thing. About your Ability Quotient and the other requirements you fulfilled before you were selected. You quoted very neatly from G. R. Taylor and I am gratified to see how quickly you are developing an all but photographic memory. However, you should also become aware of the work of the French statesman of science, Pierre Auger, who at about the same time asked whether there are some operations beyond the capacity of the human brain as we know it. It may equally be asked whether an enlarged brain might not carry man above some threshold as yet uncrossed. When the brain became large enough and complex enough to encompass speech, man separated from the animals. Men with still better brains might have capacities which we cannot even envisage and as such would constitute a different species, even a different order of beings from ourselves.” He hesitated.

Bert said, “Kay. Follow through. You have the rostrum, Professor.”

“Very well. In actuality, you have most of the picture already, my dear Alshuler. The general is quite right when he states that not every Tom, Dick and Harry are equipped to handle an I.Q. of 400, nor a truly universal education.”

“That is correct,” the general snorted.

Professor Leonard Katz looked at him. “Neither is the general, nor the group he represents.”

"What!"

Kneedler insisted, "It belongs to all of the people!"

Bert said coldly, "And why should you and I be exceptions, Katz?"

"We aren't."

Silence fell.

The professor said, and there was a sad tone in his voice, "Gentlemen, we are to be the first species that ever presided over its own extinction. And that is the ultimate *raison d'etre* of this project."

"Holy smokes," Jim said, from the bar.

"Shut up, Jim," Bert Alshuler growled. "Begin making sense, Professor."

The professor said, "The human race was not… ah… designed for an I.Q. of 400 nor a really universal mind. I am sorry, perhaps, but it was not. Even in our world today a man with an abnormally high I.Q. is often not a happy man, any more than a moron is happy. He is often a misfit. The argument can be made that if everyone, almost overnight, was bounced up four hundred percent in I.Q. that there would be no basic difference. But no. We are animals who issued forth from our caves, or down from the trees, but a few thousand years ago. Indeed, in some remote areas of our planet, we are still in them. Neolithic society to this day remains on Earth in some places. A few thousand years is no span at all, in nature. We are animals with all of our original instincts. We are unfitted for the godhead.

"In the past century we have had an information explosion as it is sometimes called. It accelerates. Robert Oppenheimer, back in the 1950s, pointed out that human knowledge was doubling every eight years. To what do we devote it? Look at what we are doing to our world. We are destroying its resources, we are polluting it, we are devoting our energies to greater and greater means of destruction. What do we do with what intelligence we have; what do we do with the information we have accumulated? What would man, as he is, do with four times as much intelligence and soon a hundredfold as much information? I am not optimistic, gentlemen."

Kneedler said, "But… but…"

Katz shrugged unhappily. "Obviously, we will all live our lives out. However, super-intelligence and ultra-knowledge is not for such as we."

The general said abruptly, "You've gone around the bend. You've never talked this way before."

"No. Of course not. Not to you, Bugs."

"Bugs!"

Katz looked at Bert and Jim. "Isn't that what the military people called him?"

Bert laughed. "Yes," he said. "He bugged everybody."

Leonard Katz nodded and went on. “You must understand, my dear Alshuler, that the biological explosion did not take place in the field of neuro-physiology alone but in practically every branch of the science, including my own, Gerontology. In the past it had been tacitly assumed that the degenerative changes occurring in the aging human being and animal are natural processes, yet when we looked for the evidence we found that it did not exist. Research in the past couple of decades has, to the contrary, shown that the degeneration is associated with identifiable extraneous causes which we are now capable of erasing.”

“What in the name of Cain are you talking about?” the general demanded.

Bert looked over at him. “He’s saying that they can prolong life—indefinitely, I suppose.”

“Yes,” the professor said. “And we have come to the conclusion—I and my colleagues—that it is just as well that the process must be begun before the birth of the child,” He looked to Bert ruefully. “Your children, and those of Miss Masterson will never die, Alshuler, except through accident, or possibly suicide.”

The silence in the room could have been cut with a knife.

The professor sighed and went on. “It was fortuitous that the two breakthroughs came almost simultaneously. Our race as it is could never have handled either an all but unlimited I.Q. nor could it have handled immortality. I leave it to your imagination the effect of the latter on the population explosion. So our project involved the selecting of our very highest Ability Quotient young people to be the parents of the new race. We sought not only I.Q. but all the other factors needed to breed the super-race, including superb health.”

Bert said slowly, “But what is the need of this ultimate education you are giving us?”

“The great need is that the new race have as beneficial an environment in which to be raised as possible. Your children, by the time they have reached maturity, will be far and beyond you, Alshuler. But compared to the rest of us here, they will be as gods and we Neanderthals.”

Bert stood and rammed his hands in his jacket pockets and began to pace in agitated thought.

The general stood too.

He said, “No.”

All eyes turned to him. “I have no intention of standing by while a group of double-domed scientists reads the human race out of existence. My group is going to take over this whole project. We’ll suppress this immortality nonsense. And we’ll take over the new perception increasing techniques and the speeded up education. Later

on, possibly, there'll be more breakthroughs in Gerontology and we'll be able to extend prolonged life to our elite, even though we're adults."

It was Kneedler's turn to stand. He shook his head at the general.

"No. I, at least, am convinced that Professor Katz is correct. And I'll make every effort, though my group, to support him. And every effort to hinder anything you attempt, General Paul."

For once, there was expression on the general's face. It was fury.

He snapped, "Captain!"

In a flow of motion, there was a laser pistol in Jim Hawkin's hand and its beam reached out. Assistant Professor Kenneth Kneedler crumbled forward to the floor.

Bert yelled, "Jim!"

The other directed the pistol at Bert Alshuler. Jim said, "Easy, old buddy. There've been some changes." Bert Alshuler's face was sick. "What was it? Jill?" Jim grinned at him. "That was just part of it, old buddy. I've been fed up for a long time with playing second fiddle to a chump like you and being told to shut up. When the general gave me the chance of taking over your position in the project, I figured at long last my licks had arrived."

Bert Alshuler had come to an abrupt halt in his pacing, but his hands were still jammed into his jacket pockets. He brought them forth now, after palming the brown pill. He ran his right hand over his mouth, in his characteristic gesture.

The general said to Katz and Marsh, "Captain Hawkins will take over Caine's position. Meanwhile, you two are under arrest."

Marsh said, "Confound it, I refuse to cooperate with you. I shall make every effort to see you murderers prosecuted."

The general snorted contempt of that. "No. You would be surprised at some of the means we have today in the way of truth serums and other devices to force the, uh, recalcitrants to our way of thinking. Keep them covered, Captain Hawkins. I'll summon some of my people."

He started toward the phone screen, walking, so it seemed to Bert Alshuler, so slowly as though plowing through a lake of molasses.

The general said, slowly, slowly, "We… were… about… ready… for… our… *coup de tat*… anyway."

Bert Alshuler blurred into movement. He flung forward at Jim Hawkins.

The other had no time to react. His trigger finger began to tighten, but far too late. With a sweep, Bert had jerked the laser pistol from his hand and jumped backward.

The general was grabbing for his sidearm.

Bert, speaking ever so slowly, at least to his own ears, said, "Don't

try it, General." And again, "Leave that gun alone, Bugs!"

But the other was deaf in his rage. Seemingly, to Bert's eyes, he slowly, slowly, slowly brought forth his gyro-jet sidearm from its holster, and slowly, slowly brought it up.

Bert Alshuler shot him.

He dipped his left hand into his pocket and brought forth the green pill and took it down. He said, "Everybody stay where they are. I'll be normal in a moment." Then, realizing that it had probably come out so fast as to be meaningless to Katz, Marsh and Jim Hawkins, he repeated it slowly.

When the green pill had taken effect, Bert looked at Jim Hawkins.

He said, "For a long time I've owed you a life, Jim. You saved mine eleven times in that machine gun nest, I saved yours ten. Kay. This evens us up. Get going, Jim."

Jim Hawkins snapped, "I'll get you for this eventually, Killer."

"No you won't, Jim. You're on the run. There's a police helio-jet up above us. I'm going to call it in, in a few minutes, and turn these laser pistols over to them. Your fingerprints will be on the power pack in yours. I'll wipe mine clean. We three remaining here will testify that you shot both Kneedler and the general I'll testify that you killed the four students who were in Kneedler's group."

"Yeah? Well, Jill witnessed that it was you who killed those four."

"Jill will be my witness, not yours, Jim. You'd better get going. You're on the run, Jim. I suggest you try and get out of the country. You don't kill a general of Security and get away with it. I doubt if his men will even allow you to give yourself up. They'll cut you down, Jim."

When the other was gone, hurrying, Bert Alshuler turned to the two professors who were rooted in their chairs, eyes goggling at the developments of the last few minutes.

Bert snapped, "Quick now. You heard what the general said about a *coup d'etat*. Is there anything you can do about it, preferably before the word gets back to his group that he's dead?"

Professor Katz shook his head for clarity. "Yes. Actually, the clique he was connected with isn't as numerous as all that. Paul was a liaison man between our organization and the government. We already knew he wasn't to be trusted and we were taking measures to have him thwarted. I'll handle it."

Bert went over to the screen phone to call Frank Harmon, the Security agent. Jim had a head start, he told himself, still sick inside. He'd probably make it out of the country.

But he hesitated and turned and looked at Katz, scowling. "You seem to have the impression that Jill Masterson and I will get married and have children and the implication is that every other one of these

man and woman teams at all the various universities will do the same. How can you be so sure? How do you know Jill will have me?"

Katz smiled complacently. "How could we ever operate in this day and age without the computer?" he said. "They report that if you and Miss Masterson are put in contact with each other, that the chance is forty-nine out of fifty that you will fall in love."

The End

Aftermath

Albert and Jill Alshuler stood at the side of the crib and stared down. The baby was the most average looking baby ever.

“Hello,” Bert said to it, touching the infinitely tiny toes with a forefinger. “Hello, little superman.”

“One week old,” Jill said. “It seems so tiny to be anything but the most normal of children.”

“Ummm.” He cocked his head slightly. “Do you think that Katz and Marsh are off their courses on all this?”

She looked up into his face. “You know, darling, I truly hope that they are. Then we’d have the same type little one as anyone else.”

The little one in question looked up at them, gurgled and said, “Hello.”